The Problem with Self-Denial and Sacrificial Living

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Certification Page

Certified, that the work contained herein is my own, except where noted and cited.

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January 30, 2024

Certified, that the work contained herein has been conducted ethically, within the parameters of the institutional review process, to the best of our knowledge, and is appropriate for fulfilling the objectives of the Doctor of Theology dissertation.

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Dedication

To Laura, whose patience, love and encouragement make me what I am, including a successful student.

Thank you to my committee who sacrificed much to lead me through this project.

To the church, the pillar and buttress of the truth, that she might be better able to recognize, confront and defeat error and evil for the eternal glory of God and the everlasting blessedness of the saints.

Abstract

Some have proposed that Christian teaching on self-denial and sacrificial love damages personhood and leads to abusive relational dynamics. From a biblical perspective, when personhood development is understood in its relational, embodied, and dialectical nature, self-denial becomes the way to mature personhood and sacrificial love leads to communal flourishing. Self-denial is an identity-forming renunciation of self-authority and the adoption of God as one's authoritative life interpreter. Sacrificial love is not abusive when it flows out of an identity anchored in Christ, is guided by wisdom, and reflects its true relational, embodied and dialectical nature. The local church can contribute to a flourishing community by engaging in spiritual disciplines such as scripture reading, self-examining prayer, and fasting in such a way that they aim to develop mature personhood and motivate healthy sacrificial love.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

The Problem 1

Previous Attempts at Resolving the Problem 2

Remove self-denial and sacrifice from Christianity. 3

Balance self-denial with self-care. 5

Biblically, Self-denial Anchors Identity and Sacrificial Love Helps Communities Flourish 6

Spiritual Practices Can Aid in Personhood Development and Flourishing Communities 8

This Dissertation's Flow of Argument 9

Part One: Self-Denial and Personhood Development 11

Chapter One: Personhood Development 14

Personhood development is relational 15

Personhood development is embodied 18

Personhood development is dialectical 23

Personhood development involves identity formation 29

Identity formation is R-E-D. 31

Chapter Two: Self-Denial 36

Historical concepts of self 36

Exegesis of biblical passages concerning self-denial 38

Matthew 10:38-39. 40

Matthew 16:24-27 and Mark 8:34-38. 44

Luke 9:23-24 & 14:26-33. 52

Self-denial is an identity-forming dynamic 55

Part Two: Sacrificial Love and Communal Flourishing 60

Chapter Three: Love is R-E-D Benevolent Giving 62

Benevolence requires knowing what is good 64

Love often desires mutual intimacy 67

Intimacy requires self-knowledge. 68

Non-judgmentalism and listening in intimacy. 71

Intimacy necessitates revealing the self. 74

Love's R-E-D characteristics prevent abusive dynamics 78

Chapter Four: Sacrificial love that does not dehumanize 86

The danger of sacrificial love 86

Healthy sacrificial love is anchored in a Christ-identity 90

Sacrificial love means giving up certain goods for another's good 95

Love of self in sacrificial love for others 99

Self-love and Augustine 101

Self-love and Bernard of Clairvaux. 103

The R-E-D nature of asymmetrical sacrifice 105

Part Three: Spiritual Practices 110

Chapter Five: The Nature of Spiritual Practices and Some Cautions 112

Spiritual formation is personhood development 112

The R-E-D nature of spiritual practices 118

Spiritual practices are relational. 119

Spiritual practices are embodied. 122

Spiritual practices are dialectical. 124

Cautions concerning spiritual practices 125

Spiritual bypassing. 126

Mission drift. 127

Works over grace. 129

Chapter Six: Scripture in Personhood Development and Sacrificial Love: Metanarrative and Meditation 131

Two correctives on scripture reading 131

Overemphasizing the cognitive. 132

Using scripture as a tool 133

The R-E-D nature of scripture reading as a spiritual practice 134

The scripture reading quadrant 138

The L/M quadrant. 146

The S/M quadrant. 147

Meditating on details-in-context. 151

Chapter Seven: Prayer in Personhood Development and Sacrificial Love: *Examen* 158

Some warnings about prayer..... 158

Prayer is R-E-D..... 159

Prayer as *Examen*..... 163

R-E-D Examen..... 166

Examen and Self-knowledge 169

Hindrances to *examen*..... 174

Examen and non-judgmentalism..... 176

Examen and Safe Relationships..... 180

Chapter Eight: Prayer in Personhood Development and Sacrificial Love: Confession, and Fasting 189

Prayerful Evaluation and conscience..... 189

R-E-D Confession..... 194

Misconstruals and dangers of confession 197

Benefits of Confession..... 200

Fasting..... 204

R-E-D fasting..... 207

Part Three Summary 211

Conclusion 214

My theoretical approach 214

Personhood Development is R-E-D and involves identity formation 216

Self-denial anchors personhood in Christ 217

Sacrificial love makes for flourishing communities 220

Spiritual practices can form identities who love sacrificially 222

References 225

Introduction

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Mark 8:34). The Apostle Paul explains that unity in the church will come when we “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit” but rather “in humility count others more significant than ourselves” (*English Standard Version Bible, 2001,* Phil. 2:3). Following Jesus and Paul, Christian teaching has rightly found that “humans … are created to find their greatest fulfillment in self-giving” (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 356). The intention of Jesus and Paul was to encourage disciples to mature and flourish as people in communion with God and one another. The very nature of self-denial establishes a healthy personhood in Christ; sacrificial love creates beautiful communities of justice and goodness.

The Problem

Yet instead of creating these results, too often teaching self-denial and sacrificial love leads to dehumanizing people and perpetuating abusive relational dynamics. Gerald Schlabach (2001) calls this “the problem of self-denial” (p. 144). Too often, adopting self-denial as a guiding principle seems to result in victimization by emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Dehumanization has been defined widely; in Buberian terms, dehumanization is acting as if a “thou” is an “it” (see Buber, 1923/1958). In his definition of dehumanization, Schlabach (2001) includes any “attempt to manipulate and control” a person (p.79). It is treating the person one claims to love “as something less than they truly are, thus degrading either the object of love, or the one loving, or both” (Schlabach, 2001, p. 79). Schlabach is correct in noting that dehumanizing behavior degrades both the subject and the object in the dehumanizing relationship. Ignoring the full personhood of others hinders one’s own self-making process such

that neither person in the relationship can become complete or mature. Dehumanization is not the intention of the biblical teaching on self-denial.

Unfortunately, however, instruction in the local church on self-denial and sacrificial love can contribute to these dehumanizing relational dynamics. Beattie (1992) explains that "we have learned some of these [destructive behaviors] from our interpretation of religion" (p.92). Henry Cloud and John Townsend (2017) demonstrate the inner dialogue of a sufferer seeking to follow Jesus: "But that's the abundant life, isn't it? Being living sacrifices.… But she couldn't help wondering when the 'abundant' part would come in" (p. 22). Instead of building healthy communities, instruction on self-denial can intensify frustration, failure, and injury. While many instances can be given in which self-denial brings about maturing personhood and flourishing communities, "some examples of self-denial are unhealthy and in some cases abominable" (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 354). E. L. Johnson's (2017) list of results from this kind of relational dynamic includes a weak sense of identity, and difficulty in expressing opinions or preferences. In severe cases these symptoms can form a syndrome labeled masochistic personality disorder (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 354). Some have described this as the "abandonment of self …" (see Beattie, 1992, p. 34), a phrase referring to the denial of personhood and its inherent dignity, as well as the injuring of identity. The words of Christ about self-denial were not intended to foster "falsely negative perceptions of the self and excessive passivity in responding to one's [relational] responsibilities in an adult world. Christian spirituality should be grounded in a healthy regard for personal identity and self-efficacy" (Getahun, 2011, p. 742).

Previous Attempts at Resolving the Problem

Several attempts have been made to address this problem. I will consider two specific ones, perhaps the two most common: removing self-denial from Christian ethics, and balancing

self-denial with self-care. I will find these to be inadequate and so will offer my own proposal. Removing self-denial and sacrifice from Christianity contradicts the direct and clear teaching of the scriptures. Attempting to balance self-denial with self-care misrepresents the nature of the two dynamics, and practically speaking the balance is difficult to gauge in one's personal experience. My proposal seeks to more clearly define self-denial and sacrificial living in order to show how the biblical understanding of them prohibits dehumanization and creates healthy flourishing relationships.

Remove self-denial and sacrifice from Christianity. The removal of self-denial completely from Christian ethics arises from the conviction that self-denial is inherently irredeemable and detrimental to the healthy development of personhood. Some proponents distinguish between *self-denial*/*self-sacrifice* (which they view as damaging) and *self-giving* (which they view as more closely describing Christlike love.) For example, Brita Gill-Austern (1996) states that "self-sacrifice and self-denial can unwittingly contribute to exploitation and domination of relationships by the more powerful party" (p. 315). Joanna Dewey (2004) in a similar vein understands the abusive dynamics brought about by teaching self-denial as being ultimately detrimental to women in particular, saying, "Many a woman has failed to develop her own identity and strengths and has embraced or endured suffering that could be alleviated because she has come to believe that such a way of life is pleasing to God and an imitation of Christ" (p. 98). These writers seem to understand the "self" in self-denial as referring to one's personhood.

But removing self-denial and personal sacrifice from Christianity is problematic for those who view the Christian text as authoritative. Because Jesus calls for self-denial and Paul encourages considering others as more significant than oneself – as seen in the opening

paragraph – the only way to remove self-denial and personal sacrifice from Christianity is to remove the authority of the scriptures through one's hermeneutical approach. This is exactly what we find in those who seek to eliminate self-denial from Christian ethics. The following extended quote from Dewey (2004) will suffice to illustrate her approach from this perspective:

> Larger problems arise from continuing to use the New Testament as sacred scripture for Christians today. While the New Testament contains much obvious good, it remains an androcentric and patriarchal text. A naive reading enculturates androcentric and patriarchal values. Every person who continues to read the bible either will be caught in such constructions of reality or will have to go through the work of deconstruction and reconstruction for a more liberative and liberating faith. Translations and paraphrases can certainly help, but they cannot eradicate the problem. I believe the problem is too fundamental. (p. 103)

Contrarily, for those "in traditional Judaism and Christianity, the bible has been more than a historical document to be preserved or a classic of literature to be cherished and admired; it is recognized as the unique record of God's dealings with people over the ages" (Metzger, 2003, p. xx). The text claims to be God's word to human beings through human beings, not human beings' ideas about God. The prophets say things like, "The word of the Lord came to me," and they claim authority with "Thus says the Lord." In Peter's second letter he claims that the Old Testament was not "produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, 2 Pet. 1:21), and that this was not their "own interpretation" (1:20). He later equates Paul's writing with "the other scriptures" (3:16). The internal claim of the bible is that the words of Jesus and Paul which encourage self-denial and sacrificial love are authoritative for the believer.

This dissertation will not address the issue of the scriptures arising out of a patriarchal culture. One of my presuppositions is that the Christian scripture is authoritative and infallible. The Bible does not encourage any relational dynamics which denigrate human personhood, but instead seeks to see each human being flourish to their greatest potential. Therefore, denying scripture's authority on the grounds that it encourages dehumanization or perpetuates abusive relational dynamics is unnecessary. It is possible to uphold scripture's authority while simultaneously rejecting anything that denigrates human personhood or perpetuates abusive relational dynamics and still maintain an ethic of self-denial and sacrificial love.

Balance self-denial with self-care. The second attempt at alleviating dehumanization and abusive dynamics arising out of self-denial and sacrificial love is more common in the evangelical world; it is the encouragement to balance self-denial with self-care. Henry Cloud and John Townsend (2017) say, "Balance. It's something that God has wired into every system" (p. 166), and they describe the experience of a client who "resented the imbalance" in one of their friendships (p. 18). Many writers use "balance" language when discussing the tension between love for self and love for others. In one place, Giddens (1991) calls for "balance and reciprocity" (p. 91) and in another for "balance between autonomy and the sharing of feelings" (p. 95). Ellen Birx (2014) says, "Doing for others needs to be balanced with caring for yourself" (p. 157). Minirth, Meier, and Hemfelt (2003) speak of a "damaging, unstable lack of balance between dependence and independence" (p. 18). Beattie (1992) says, "learning to live and love again means finding a balance" (p. 231). And finally could be added Dobson (1996), who says, "extreme independence is as destructive to a relationship as total dependence.… This might be the most delicate tightrope act in marriage" (p. 196).

I find this proposed solution of balancing opposing dynamics to be insufficient. While it might be helpful to a point in addressing abusive dynamics, ultimately it is ineffective for deeper transformation because it is based on a faulty presupposition: that self-sacrifice is a draining negative dynamic which must be countered with an opposing positive upbuilding one, self-care. In this solution's relational economy, both too much self-care and too much selflessness are unhealthy. Ultimately, where this proposed solution sees an adversarial relationship between the two dynamics, I see a dialectical one. A dialectical schema understands opposing dynamics as interdependent with one another, not adversarial to one another. I will show that love of self and love of others within the context of love of God are dialectically connected for the Christian. Additionally, a disciple can "love one's neighbor as oneself" (*English Standard Version* Bible, 2001, Lev. 19:18; Matt. 5:43; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8) because God's love for the disciple pours into them. It is an open system, not a closed one. The dialectical model does not call for balancing opposing forces. Instead, it understands that in the context of the love of God for everyone, love of self and love for others arise out of the same motivation and are mutually dependent on one another.

Biblically, Self-denial Anchors Identity and Sacrificial Love Helps Communities Flourish

This dissertation's thesis is that the very nature of self-denial and sacrificial love work against dehumanization and abusive dynamics; therefore, any teaching on them that produces the opposite effect must be in error of presentation or application. I have a theoretical goal – establishing important characteristics of personhood development, self-denial and sacrificial love – and a practical one – encouraging the local church to adopt practices informed by these characteristics. First, I will lay out a theoretical schema for personhood development and interpersonal relationships which explains why self-denial and sacrificial love do not

dehumanize or perpetuate abusive relationships. While the dynamics that misconstrue self-denial and sacrificial love and make them dehumanizing are complex, I propose that working from a schema informed by the *R*elational, *E*mbodied, and *D*ialectical nature of personhood development and interpersonal relations will greatly increase the awareness of and resistance to abusive and dehumanizing behaviors. These three characteristics will be referred to with the acronym R-E-D.

The human person is relational, being formed and self-understood only in connection with other human beings. The human person is embodied, being a unified whole inseparably made up of both material and immaterial aspects. The human person is formed dialectically; the two processes of individuation and integration, though working in opposite directions, are not in opposition to one another. Rather, they are mutually dependent on one another; neither process can occur without the opposite process occurring at the same time to the same degree. Likewise, sacrificial love is dialectical in the sense that by the act of giving the lover receives psychological, spiritual, and emotional goods in a mutually interrelated dynamic. Ignoring one or more of these R-E-D characteristics of personhood development and sacrificial love can be harmful, dehumanizing the participants and perhaps perpetuating abusive dynamics.

Identity formation is one of the core processes of personhood development and therefore will be discussed in detail. Identity is a narrative one tells oneself which assigns sense and purpose to one's existence. Personal identity is not static, but is best understood as a dynamic which continually reshapes itself and acts from itself. Identity is so dynamic that some view it almost as a verb instead of a noun: "We don't have a self as much as we 'selve'"(Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 48). Significantly for our purposes, identity formation, like personhood in general, is also relational, embodied, and dialectical in its formation and action. A healthy

identity narrative, being a story, interprets the past and the present to provide a telos, or end purpose, for one's existence. In this way, healthy personhood includes a true identity narrative that provides a just, right, and beautiful meaning and mission for the individual-in-community. Dehumanization and abusive dynamics do not align with this telos and take away from the justice, rightness, and beauty of the self and can therefore be identified and rejected.

Distinguishing between self-denial and sacrificial love will be important to my argument, so much so that the dissertation is divided by this distinction. Often in other contexts these two terms seem to be used interchangeably, but this confuses the issues we are addressing. From my perspective, self-denial is a relational, embodied, and dialectical dynamic between the disciple and God. Sacrificial love is a relational, embodied, and dialectical dynamic between human beings. Self-denial is the renouncing of self-as-authority, and the receiving of God as authoritative life-interpreter. Sacrificial love, on the other hand, occurs when one chooses not to receive a certain good for oneself in order for another to receive a certain good. Due to the dialectical nature of giving and receiving, a loss-gain construal or a balancing dynamic between self-love and others-love hinders fruitfulness. The Christian scriptures see the two actions of self-denial and sacrificial love as life-giving and beneficial to people and communities. Self-denial is the process God uses to transform a disciple into a mature and flourishing person-in-community. Sacrificial love is what God uses to bring dignity, justice, and goodness into interpersonal relationships. These two actions are intended to work against the destructive effects of dehumanization and abusive relationships. Therefore, where there are dehumanizing and abusive dynamics, there is most probably an underlying rejection of the biblical view of self-denial and sacrificial love.

Spiritual Practices Can Aid in Personhood Development and Flourishing Communities

The practical result of this theoretical work will be guiding the local church to cultivate healthy personhood development – including identity formation – and relational dynamics as goals of discipleship. Spiritual practices, when approached with the relational-embodied-dialectical nature of personhood development, identity formation and sacrificial love in mind, can aid the maturation of healthy disciples who deny themselves and love sacrificially without those dynamics becoming dehumanizing or abusive. I will demonstrate this through a discussion of scripture reading, confessional prayer and fasting as examples of spiritual practices that can purposefully develop personhood and encourage healthy relational dynamics.

This Dissertation's Flow of Argument

Part One of this dissertation connects self-denial before God to the healthy personhood development of the disciple. In Chapter One I will explain in more detail the relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of personhood development and identity formation. In Chapter Two I will survey the biblical call of Jesus to self-denial and show how it can be a transformational exchange at the deepest levels of one's person. Self-denial is a continual act of renouncing one's own authority to interpret life while receiving from God the right interpretation of the self in relation to God, others, and creation. This life-interpreting narrative from God provides a dignified significance and an eternal purpose for the disciple which works against dehumanizing dynamics.

Part Two connects sacrificial love for others to communal flourishing. In Chapter Three love is defined as benevolent giving. Due to the nature of personhood development, love also has relational, embodied, and dialectical attributes. Chapter Four will explain how sacrifice, instead of perpetuating abusive relational dynamics, can actually work against them. Sacrificial love will be viewed as the forfeiting of a certain good in order that another may have a certain good. I will

show how an identity anchored in self-denial before God informs sacrificial love. Augustine's and Bernard of Clairvaux's works will shed light on the difference between proper and improper self-love and its relationship to love of God and love of others. I will close the chapter showing how, despite the often asymmetrical nature of sacrifice in loving relationships, the telos of the self-denied identity, wisdom concerning the good, and the R-E-D characteristics of sacrificial love keep it from becoming abusive.

In Part Three, I move from the theoretical to the practical. I discuss how the local church can approach spiritual disciplines in such a way that they help the community of disciples to develop identities which prevent self-denial and sacrificial love from becoming dehumanizing. Chapter Five will show how the R-E-D characteristics of personhood development inform engagement in spiritual practices, with some warnings about how spiritual practices can have the opposite effect as intended. Chapters Six through Eight then explore how scripture, self-examining prayer, confession and fasting, informed by their R-E-D natures, can develop healthy persons-in-community.

The conclusion summarizes that while some instances of self-denial and sacrificial love dehumanize people and perpetuate abusive dynamics, this is due to misconstruals and misapplication of these Christian virtues. When they are understood in light of the relational, embodied and dialectical nature of personhood development, especially identity formation, they better identify and resist dehumanization and abuse. Likewise, when spiritual practices are engaged within the R-E-D framework, local churches can make disciples who are anchored in their identities from which they can sacrificially love in a way that recognizes and works against dehumanization and abuse in their relationships.

Part One: Self-Denial and Personhood Development

The problem with self-denial and sacrificial love is that they are often understood and applied in a way that creates dehumanization and perpetuates abusive relational dynamics. I find it helpful to separate the problem into two related but discernible issues, connecting the concern with dehumanization to issues of personhood development, while viewing the concern about abusive relationships to be more closely connected with sacrificial love. I recognize that abusive dynamics fall under the broader concept of dehumanization and so the distinction is somewhat contrived. Most of the authors I cite do not clearly distinguish these two concerns, but that may be part of why the discussion has been somewhat confusing and of limited effectiveness in equipping the local church in helping disciples grow to deeper fruitfulness in personal and relational maturity.

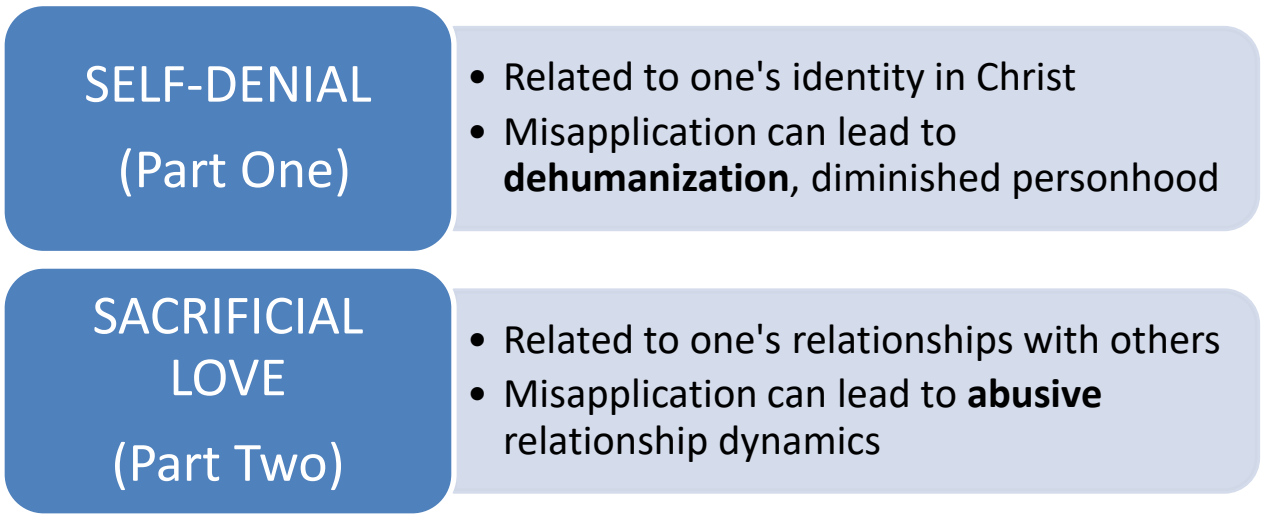
SELF-DENIAL
(Part One)
• Related to one's identity in Christ
• Misapplication can lead to **dehumanization**, diminished personhood
SACRIFICIAL LOVE
(Part Two)
• Related to one's relationships with others
• Misapplication can lead to **abusive** relationship dynamics

Figure One. *The distinction between self-denial and sacrificial love*

Dehumanization tends to refer to an attack on the individual's dignity and fullness as a person while abuse generally refers to relational dynamics. I make these separate connections because the scriptures seem to describe self-denial as a specifically personhood-developing exchange

between a disciple and God, while sacrificial love occurs within human interpersonal relationships. In other words, the believer is not asked to deny the self in relation to other human beings. For the Christian, sacrificial love of the kind that Jesus displays arises out of an identity that is being anchored in Christ through self-denial. This delineation will become clearer as I lay out self-denial in this first part and cover sacrificial love in Part Two.

Here in Part One, I conclude that self-denial, viewed biblically, instead of encouraging dehumanization, actually bears fruit in anchoring the identity of the disciple and therefore paving the way for personal maturation. To reach this conclusion, I will first lay out three important characteristics of personhood development, that it is relational, embodied, and dialectical. In light of these three characteristics, I will show how identity formation in particular reflects them and how they will work against dehumanization.

Once personhood development is more clearly defined in Chapter One, in Chapter Two I will look at the Christian scriptures in which Jesus claims that disciples must deny themselves in order to follow him. This exegetical exploration will conclude that the bible uses the concept of self-denial exclusively for the dynamic between God and the disciple of Jesus. Self-denial in the biblical sense means renouncing one's place as the authoritative interpreter of life and receiving God as that authority. The language of renouncing and receiving is important, for it stands against the popular conception that one must create or find one's identity. Jesus's claims imply that only when one adopts God's assignation of meaning and mission does one engage with the truth of reality, truth itself already being relational and embodied in Jesus Christ. When one continually engages in the authority-exchange of self-denial before God, one discovers that God's purpose for creation is human flourishing which necessarily includes a disciple's

maturation as a person-in-community. Therefore, only through identity-forming self-denial is one's fulfillment as a human being experienced. This is the exact opposite of dehumanization.

Chapter One: Personhood Development

If one is to claim that an activity or situation is dehumanizing, then one must have an idea of what the fullness of a person looks like and how it comes to maturation. Dehumanization would then be any circumstance in which, or because of which, one's full personhood is denied or prevented from maturing. This chapter will focus on three specific characteristics (relational, embodied, and dialectical: R-E-D) of the human person and how it develops. Personhood is *the condition of being an embodied relational individual, including all the actual and potential material and nonmaterial aspects that allow for self-knowledge and interpersonal relationships.*

Linde Getahun (2011) describes the self as "a life force that continually defines how we understand our world and how we relate to it and shape it" (p. 742). In both her and my definitions there is an internal aspect which interacts with the external world through interpreting it and moving within it, engaging with other persons who likewise have their own interconnected internal and external aspects. Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson (2003) use similar concepts in their attempt at defining personhood: "For us, a person (or psychological person) is an identifiable, embodied individual human with being, self-understanding (self), agentic capability, and personal identity" (p.111). Note their inclusion of embodiedness and self-understanding, reflecting my definition above. Although they neglect to mention the relationality inherent in being a person, it is significant that they include personal identity, which will be an important aspect of personhood I will discuss in this chapter because of its intricate relationship with self-denial.

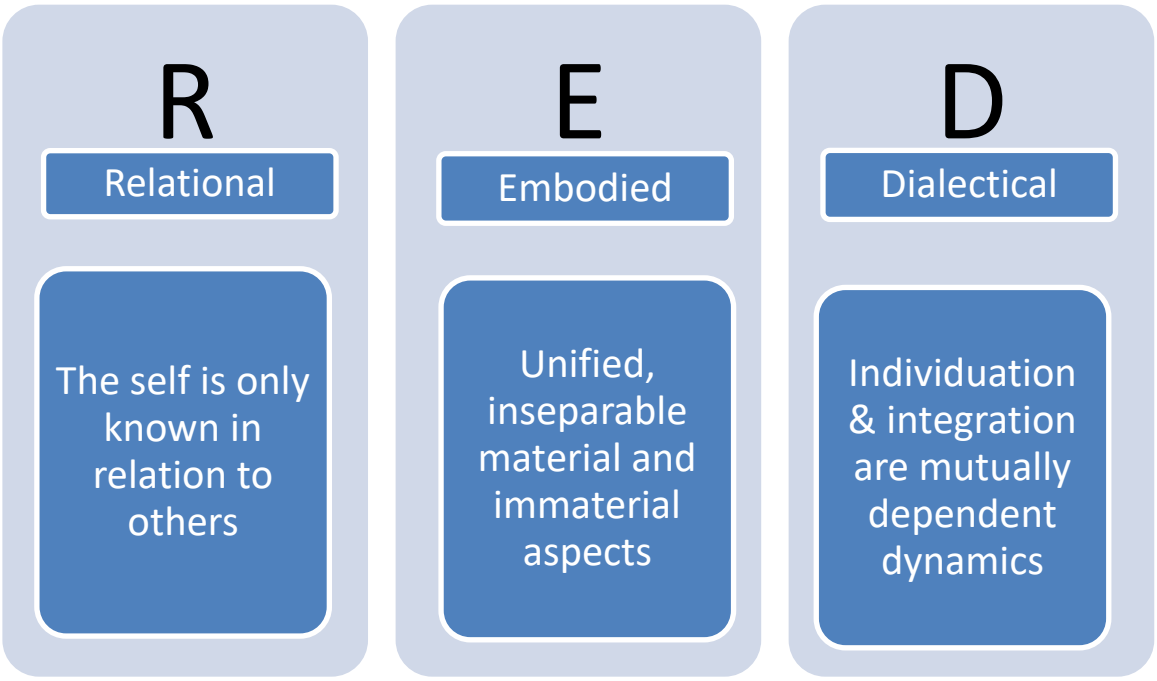

Figure Two. *The R-E-D characteristics of personhood development*

Personhood development is relational

Self-awareness and self-understanding occur within the context of relating to other persons. This is the *Relational* aspect of personhood development, represented by the letter "R" in my R-E-D acronym. To call personhood development relational is to agree with the concept of intersubjectivity, the idea that one's "self is subjectively known and experienced on the basis of relationship" (Balswick et al., 2016, pp. 141–142). We need to interact with others to develop personal identity, a narrative that explains our meaning and purpose. Any integrated sense of self-existence arises out of relationships with other human beings.

Relationships shape one's agency, form identity, deepen self-awareness, and mold how we think and feel about ourselves, as well as about the things and people around us. Personhood matures within relationship. Because "our relationships are always forming our personalities"

(Saucy, 2013, p. 213), identity and self-awareness are dynamic, ever-forming and ever-developing experiences. The complex development of healthy human psychology occurs in a reciprocal social context, so "full becoming requires the presence of an other" (Gill-Austern, 1996, p. 319). Ultimately, "human development ideally takes place" in a "relational context," and "culture is a significant influence on development insofar as the child is socialized into a particular worldview" (Balswick et al., 2016, pp. 17, 95). In other words, from before birth and beyond, one's relationships with other people so strongly influence the building blocks for interpreting everything – self-awareness, feelings about the self, and mental development – that it may be better to denote a person as a "person-in-community." Strawn and Brown (2020) agree, saying, "Our sense of personhood is largely constituted by the impact of our interactions with others" (p. 50).

Considering relationships as foundational for personhood is a relatively recent development in the field. Historically, "from Aristotle [in the fourth century BC] to Kant [in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries] the *substance* of particular things – such as an individual person – was of primary importance. Since Kant *relationality* has become the key focus" (Balswick et al., 2016, p. 22, emph. orig.). However, this understanding of the self seems to be somewhat limited to academia. In popular conceptions of the self, especially in North America and other cultures dominated by Western thought, the focus is on the individual (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 20). Carl Trueman (2020) traces the roots of the contemporary Western idea of the self as a solitary atomistic person to the psychologizing of the self and to expressive individualism (p. 64). The combination of these two trends results in personal identity no longer being found in reference to the wider culture and social relationships but now being found within the individual themselves (Trueman, 2020, p. 48). Stanton Jones (1997) also references "the

growing acceptance of psychological and other social scientific understandings of the person" (p. 193). He traces this shift back to Freud and those who built off his work during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (also see Herman, 2015, ch. 1).

While popular conceptions of selfhood still hold to an individualistic schema, social development theorists would go so far as to say that no person could exist as we know personhood without social interaction. Martin Buber makes this point most fully. In discussing interhuman relations, Buber (1958) coined the term "I-Thou." This refers to a relationship in which both persons recognize and connect subjectively as full human beings and not as generalized and limited objects. If one were to depersonalize the other, the relationship would be termed I-it; if one had a depersonalized view of the self it might be termed an it-it or it-Thou relationship. Buber sees the relationship between people as mutual in its effect, saying "My *Thou* affects me, as *I* affect it" (Buber, 1958, p. 15). He is not merely describing how two individual people connect together. Using his terms carefully, he distinguishes between an individual and a person, saying that individuals do not exist at all but that a person can only exist in relation to one or more others. "I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*" (Buber, 1923/1958, p. 11). In other words, an "I" can only know he or she is an "I" if there is a "Thou" from which to differentiate the "I."

It will be important for those who seek to prevent dehumanization and abusive dynamics to reject the individualistic approach to understanding the self and build relationality into the schema of building healthy personhood. If the inherent relationality of personhood is true, seeing someone as an individual outside of being a self-in-community is itself a dehumanizing act. It is no coincidence that very abusive people seek to separate their partners from their original relationships – family and friends – in order to control and manipulate them. One of the early

signs of emotional and physical abuse is when "the abuser slowly severs all emotional ties except the one to him/her" (Collaborative Therapeutic Services, 2020). Isolating persons dehumanizes them, refusing to see them as a person who develops within the context of both early and later relationships. For the Christian, seeing spiritual development as something that occurs only inwardly and can be accomplished outside of the community of faith is dehumanizing because it ignores the relational aspect of personhood development. Engagement with the local church is not an optional element to spiritual growth for the Christian. Grasping the inherent relationality of personhood development requires moving "away from an understanding of Christian faith and life as individual achievements" and toward realization that "both faith and life are constituted and enlarged by extension of ourselves into the corporate life of the body of Christ" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 14).

Personhood development is embodied

While this all seems very psychological and inward focused, the development of human personhood is also physical and external. In addition to being relational, personhood development is also *Embodied*, the "E" of the R-E-D acronym. Human beings are not persons inside bodies, nor are they persons who have bodies. Human beings are embodied persons. This terminology recognizes and emphasizes the intermutual relationship between the material and immaterial natures of human existence. The Christian concept of embodied personhood contrasts deeply with the idea of the "ghost in the machine," a derisive term first coined by Gilbert Ryle to describe the philosophy of René Descartes who proposed a severe mind-body dualism (Brown et al., 1998, p. 176). Although dualism has entered Western conceptualizations of personhood and spirituality, McKnight (2009) asserts that "the Christian tradition teaches that there is a duality

about humans, but there is no dualism" (p. 17). A human individual is "one person with an inner and outer dimension, but not comprised of two parts" (McKnight, 2009, p. 17).

The Cartesian worldview understood the mind to be in an entirely separate category of being than the physical brain. Traditional Christian anthropology and the conclusions of contemporary neurological studies seem to work against this conceptualization. One will find a "near universal rejection of mind/body dualism in modern philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and neuroscience" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 41). Van der Kolk (2015) was so confident in the connection between the mind and the physical that he entitled his book *The Body Keeps the Score* to explain how our biological systems acknowledge the psychological and emotional effects of trauma even when our conscious awareness does not. In the same way, Hefner et al. (2015) coined the phrase "bodyself" to express this reality. It is not uncommon in Western academic literature to create compound or hyphenated words in order to counteract the deeply entrenched dualism found in Western thought.

Embodiedness explains how listening to what our bodies are "saying" can lead us to understand inner thoughts, beliefs and narratives of which we would not otherwise be aware. Our physical health, our ability to sense our own physical condition, and how we pose and use our bodies are not irrelevant to our spiritual or relational practices nor our spiritual transformation and relational maturation. There are times when it is easier to know one's physical state than one's psychological and emotional state. In these circumstances, one can be trained to look for the physical evidence of one's inner dynamics because "through the wisdom of our bodies, God tells us to slow down or reorder our priorities" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 34). For example, we may not be aware that we are anxious or angry unless we sit quietly and pay attention to any tension in our muscles, the shallowness of our breathing, or the butterflies in our gut. Taking

time to know our physical status at any given moment can guide our prayers to a deeper honesty and therefore a deeper transformation. Because human beings are embodied, knowing one's body leads to knowing one's inner state, and knowing one's inner state can deepen the intimacy in one's relationship with God and others because intimacy requires exposing your inner self which requires knowledge of the inner self.

In the same manner, because humans are embodied persons, regulating one's bodily responses can help one regulate psychological responses, and vice versa. When triggered by a circumstance in which one has become accustomed to responding negatively, sometimes it is easier to gain control over one's biological reactions than one's psychological responses. For example, deep breaths have been proven to be effective at relaxing muscles, clearing the mind from distractions, slowing down the heartbeat, and sharpening attention. Breathing exercises are a common method of regulating physical, emotional and psychological stress: "Through altering the type, rate and ratio of breath, we engage the vagal pathways that influence the beating of the heart and the messages to the brain" (Dana, 2018, p. 135). Dana (2018) has argued that this biologically and psychologically relaxed state opens a person to connecting with others because "safety is the foundation" (p. 118) for emotional acceptance and response with others. Feeling calm and safe increases one's reception and acceptance of other people, including God. Because human beings are embodied, regulating one's body can lead to regulating one's psychological and emotional states. This becomes very important in maintaining the biopsychological states necessary to recognize dehumanizing and abusive behaviors and to respond in ways that protect oneself from them.

Supporting the notion that human personhood is both relational and embodied is the presence of biological structures that make interpersonal connections possible. Balswick et al.

(2016) identify four places in the brain, present even in infants, that work together to allow for relationships (pp 137-139). The orbitomedial prefrontal cortex is where "self-referencing representations and schema are formed" (Balswick et al. 2016, p. 137). The anterior cingulate cortex allows an infant to "monitor self in relation to other faces, important for maintaining close attachments with caregivers" (p. 138). The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex "helps evaluate stimuli and make judgments about their meaning and value related to the self" (p. 139); this is how babies can recognize and respond to the voices of their caregivers while ignoring the voices of strangers. Fourthly, the posterior cingulate cortex "integrates goals and experiences into a coherent sense of self that builds over time with the addition of autobiographical memory" (Balswick et al., 2016, p. 139).

But the embodiedness of our personhood goes beyond just recognizing the parts of the physical brain which are engaged in one's internal dynamics. The embodied nature of human personhood is seen in the connection between the mind, the brain, and the rest of the body; "the hyper complex physical system that is a human being has aspects of the whole person … that are emergent from the ongoing interplay of the parts … but cannot be said to be properties of the parts themselves" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 41). To say that the person is embodied, or even that cognition is embodied, is about more than the "physicality of the mind," (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 44), for it has been shown – by Porges (2011), Dana (2018) and others – that "the processes of thinking actually involve the entire body" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 44).

In addition to the brain areas mentioned above, there are other biological systems in human physiology that make social connection possible. One part of the interpersonal neurological system is mirror neurons. These have been labeled "neural WiFi" (D. Coleman, 2006, cited in van der Kolk, 2015, pp. 58–59) for the way that they receive input from the

neurological system of other people. Mirror neurons explain how empathy, imitation, synchrony, and even the development of language are possible (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 58). The existence of mirror neurons allows the rested emotional state of one person to positively affect the dysregulated emotional state of another person. Deb Dana (2018) bases her work with adults suffering from trauma on the concepts first developed by Stephen Porges that "we all share the same biobehavioral platform" (p. 17) and therefore can connect to one another.

Because the biological systems that make for self-protection and those that make for relational connection are interrelated, it is necessary first for the body's biological threat detection system to stand down. "The inhibition of a survival response" is required "so that social engagement can happen" (Dana, 2018, p. 17). When a person is being dehumanized or abused, biological responses may occur without conscious thought which have the effect of making emotional and psychological connection physiologically difficult. Because personhood is embodied, human flourishing requires the absence of abuse and dehumanization so that the biological systems that make for healthy interpersonal relationships can activate.

Dana (2018), Porges (2011), and Strawn & Brown (2020) also connect human embodiedness with relationality. When one has a dualistic conception of body and soul, separating the inner and outer life of a person, the spiritual life of the individual becomes isolated from the community. This is dehumanizing in two ways: by belittling the body as a mere addendum or as a container for the supposedly more important soul, and by belittling the relationships which serve to form the identity of that person. An understanding of spirituality that focuses on one's inner feelings and experiences "privileges the inner over the outer, the soul over the body, feelings over behavior, and the individual over the community" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 27). The scriptures don't seem to neglect the physicality of the body when speaking of

the goodness of the human person or the healing and wholeness that Jesus came to bring; salvation and human spirituality include the body in some way. Strawn and Brown (2020) recognize the strong dualism of some contemporary approaches as arising out of Augustinian tradition and from the contemporary focus on individualism (p. 27). Trueman (2020) also traces modern individualism as arising from the Enlightenment and popular Romanticism (see esp. ch. 3-4).

Personhood development is dialectical

In addition to relationality and embodiedness, the third important characteristic of personhood development relevant to our discussion is its Dialectical nature, the "D" in the R-E-D acronym. Dialectical refers to a dynamic in which two opposite processes are mutually dependent on one another. There are at least two ways to interpret the relationship between any two opposing forces. In the first interpretation, the opposing forces are deemed adversarially antithetical to one another and need to be "balanced" across a spectrum in order to be healthy. But in the dialectical interpretation, the opposing forces are interdependent, needing one another in order to exist, popularly explained by the phrase "two sides of the same coin." There cannot be an obverse side of a coin without a reverse; they cannot exist without one another, even though they are "opposites." In the same way, with two dialectical processes, neither one can occur outside of the presence of the other process also occurring.

G. C. Berkouwer's (1962) thoughts on dualism may be helpful in picturing dialecticism. Although he is speaking within a different context, the concept carries over. "Duality," he says, "becomes a dualism only when there is a polar tension, an inner separation which destroys the unity between the terms" (Berkouwer, 1962, p. 212). In personhood development, two opposing dynamics mutually work together: *individuation from* others and *integration with* others. The

"balance" view sees these as containing an inherent adversarial relationship, making them polarities which contradict each other in such a way that one process may become more pronounced than another. However, the "dialectical" view, which is adopted in this dissertation, sees the duality of the two processes of individuation and integration as interdependent, not adversarial; instead of tension and contradiction there is reliance. In Berkouwer's (1962) terms, the dialectical view holds a "duality" without a "dualism."

Buber (1966) describes the dialectic of personhood development as a duality between distance and relation, or between differentiation from and intimate connection with the other. I refer to these as individuation and integration. A person cannot know another by distance, that is, by an emotionally detached observation. They can only know the other in relation, in the "personal making present" (Buber, 1966, p. 80). Yet, in connecting with the other, they must experience themselves as an individual separate from the individual with whom they are connecting. These two processes of connection and separation occur continually from before birth and into adulthood until death (see Balswick et al., 2016 esp. ch. 6-7). This relates to avoiding dehumanization in that "a mark of mature personal agency is the capacity to pursue greater social differentiation and integration throughout life" (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 493). Becoming more fully human, that is maturing as a human being, means both a deepening integration with others with a deepening individuation from others.

Integration (connection or relation) unites an individual with other people; individuation (differentiation or separation) distinguishes the individual from others. Integration is the knowing of the self in relation to other selves: "I am my mother's daughter." Differentiation is the knowing of the self as separate from other selves: "I have needs, ideas and goals that are different from my mother's." Integration recognizes sameness of nature such that belonging is

sensed with another person. Individuation recognizes a difference of nature such that distinction is sensed separate from another person. Balswick et al. (2016) describe these two processes as states of being – "unity and uniqueness" (p. 40) – by which they mean unity connects us intimately with others and uniqueness distinguishes us from any and every other person. They, like Buber (1966) and E. L. Johnson (2017), view differentiation as developing through connection and vice versa (Balswick, pp.223-224).

Volf also perceives personhood development in a dialectical schema, describing it as the creative activity of "separating-and-binding" that results in patterns of interdependence between people (Volf, 2019, p. 59). In order to speak of the process, he had to invent a hyphenated description. This hyphenation of words is required to adequately express the dialectical view because it recognizes the danger in focusing on one descriptor to the detriment of the other equally important descriptor. In a similar way, I will sometimes use "person-in-community" to refer to an individual who cannot be conceived of outside of the relationships which continually form the person through both integration and individuation.

Regarding the development of a sense of self separate from the identity of others, Volf says, "the human self is formed not through a simple rejection of the other … but through a complex process of 'taking in' *and* 'keeping out'" (Volf, 2019, p. 59, emph. orig.). His emphasis on the word "and" expresses his dialectical approach. The child does not merely begin to realize that they experience a different existence separate from their mother; they come to the realization *by* connecting to their mother. In the same way, they connect to their mother *by* recognizing themselves as a separate person. Without the relationship they would have no sense of separate identity; in like manner, the sense of individuality allows for the connection with the other. Therefore Volf can claim, "the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges"

(Volf, 2019, p. 59). So interpersonal connection involves "a certain kind of *assertion* of the self in the presence of the other and a certain kind of *deference* of the other before the self" (Volf, 2019, p. 354, emph. mine). Volf recognizes the necessity of boundary maintenance for intimacy without setting the boundaries and the intimacy at odds with one another.

Non-abusive relationships between people rely on the personhood development of each person, just as their individual development as a person relies on their relationship with each other. Every individual matures in self-knowledge through relationships for "it is only through this process of being known that you come to know yourself and learn how to know others. There is no other way" (C. Thompson, 2010, p. 38). Henri Nouwen (2006) connects personhood development with interpersonal relationships when he describes communal life as bringing out both our unique roles while at the same time confirming our sameness with one another (pp. 77–78). Erich Fromm (2013) calls the interrelatedness of integration and individuation a "paradox [in which] two beings become one and yet remain two" (p. 42). A "balance" view of personhood development cannot take into account these dialectical insights.

The consequences of holding either a "balance" view or a dialectical view of personhood development come to bear in how each view understands the pathway to health. The "balance" view will counsel focusing on either integration or individuation, depending on which appears to be neglected. For example, Salvador Minuchin's (1974) work on family therapy was based on an antithetical/balanced schema. He coined the phrase "enmeshment" to describe one pole on a continuum with "disengagement" on the opposite side and "normal" relational dynamics in between (p. 54). At this early stage of the use of the term "enmeshment", he made clear that it related to a "transactional style" (Minuchin, 1974, p. 55), not a dysfunction. In his schema, when enmeshment was present to an extreme, it was expressed through "overprotectiveness," and

"lack of conflict resolution" (p. 242). In a later work, Minuchin (1981) described enmeshment's expression as "overinvolvement" characterized by a "tremendous concern for the maintenance of peace" (p.60). Ultimately, he saw it as hampering differentiation among individuals within family systems (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981, pp. 56–57). Here Minuchin connected unhealthy relational dynamics with unhealthy, or perhaps incomplete, personhood development.

More recently, Sandage (2011) seems to work from a similar framework when he says "low levels of differentiation result in the relational extremes of either enmeshment or estrangement that can sabotage spiritual growth in families and faith communities" (p. 194). Sandage, too, is connecting personhood development ("differentiation") to relational dynamics ("enmeshment" and "estrangement.") Enmeshment in this schema is seen as a person's identity construction being too closely dependent on another person, making for a weak individuation. On the opposite end, estrangement would be understood as a person avoiding connection with others and thus hindering healthy relational dynamics, making for weak integration. Sandage (2011) speaks of the healthy self having "an ability to balance intimacy and autonomy, or community and solitude, in relationships" (p.194). The word "balance" reveals the assumption of polar tension between the two personhood-development dynamics of individuation (differentiation) and integration (connection) as well as between the relational dynamics of connection and separation.

For Minirth, Meier and Hemfelt (2003), too, healthy personhood needs "balance in relationships, avoiding estrangement as much as enmeshment" (p. 203). However, they seem to underestimate the communal environment in which the self is made when they claim that "the Christian's self, completeness, and value all exist within; they do not depend on outside relationships with others. The person is secure within" (Hemfelt et al., 2003, p. 122). Their

schema too rigidly bifurcates the processes involved in personhood development and interpersonal relationships. Conceiving of individuation and integration as opposing processes has led Minirth and Meier to adopt a balancing rhetoric to help people avoid dehumanization and abusive dynamics. This ends up running contrary to much of the R-E-D characteristics I am espousing.

From a "balance" perspective, the enmeshed person is seen as overly connected relationally and the estranged person as overly separated relationally and therefore both are seen as suffering from immature personhood development. But from a "dialectical" framework in which integration and individuation cannot exist without the other, I would claim that the "enmeshed" person is actually not experiencing true interpersonal connection at all. Without sufficient individuation, there can be no integration, just as without integration there can be no individuation. The two processes are mutually dependent. Therefore, any language which conceptualizes enmeshment as too much connection is misleading, ignoring the dialectical nature of the two processes. The "enmeshed" person is actually experiencing a pseudo-connection, not truly knowing the other and not truly knowing the self. The "estranged" person is not actually overly individuated, but due to isolation lacks a strong self-concept because, according to the dialectical view, interpersonal connection is required for self-conception. The "balance" schema of personhood development in the long run will not help avoid dehumanization or abusive dynamics because it misunderstands how personhood is developed through the two opposite but not opposing processes of individuation and integration.

Because personhood is developed dialectically through the two interdependent processes of individuation and integration, dehumanization will occur when either of the processes is hindered. When integration is hindered, such as when a person is kept distant relationally in a

context that resists knowing each other intimately, self-conception as an individual is hindered as well. And when individuation is hindered, as when a person is prevented from thinking and acting differently from the established relational dynamics – as might be found in families with a member suffering with addiction, for example – then the skills necessary for connecting to others are necessarily hindered from developing as well. Healthy integration and healthy individuation are both necessary for healthy personhood development. Anything less may become both dehumanizing and abusive because it would hinder both personal and social development.

Personhood development involves identity formation

Foundational to personhood development is identity formation which similarly reflects a R-E-D nature. Identity is strongly informed by the personal narrative one constructs to bring meaning and purpose to one's relational existence; so much so that Rosner (2022) can say, "you are your story" (p. 163). The identity-narrative is the result of, and the means by which, one interprets the meaning and purpose of all things. It is the action and product of self-hermeneutics. Individuals attribute meaning to the actions of others by creating a story to explain them and their motivations, just as they make sense of their own history, condition, and future by telling a story. The construction of a narrative is a means through which interpretation is expressed and meaning assigned to facts and events so that "we create and discover meaning through a story process" (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 233).

Some contemporary theorists argue that identity emerges through the telling of a personal story, and by this means people organize the diverse aspects of their lives into what they see as a meaningful whole (Grenz, 2002). Other theorists take care to make a clear distinction between one's self-narrative and one's identity (personal dialogue with Eric Johnson, January 2024). For the sake of this project I will speak of identity as being formed and understood through a

narrative explaining why things exist and what one's place in existence is; it is ultimately a hermeneutical process of all creation and one's relation to it. This ability and the drive to create an identity-narrative is unique to human beings among all the created world, for the "ability to tell stories … distinguishes us from all other living creatures" (C. Thompson, 2010, p. 74).

At this point it will be helpful to explain what I mean by biblical metanarrative, sometimes referred to in this paper as the Christ narrative. The metanarrative is the overarching story that connects all the smaller stories of the Bible together in a way that reveals God's purposes and telos for creation. In essence, the biblical metanarrative explains that God made the world perfect and placed humanity in it to serve as his reflection in it and to it. But the first human beings rebelled against the divine purpose and interpreted their place in the world differently, taking on their own meaning and significance apart from God's truth, beauty and holiness. This caused a deformation in their nature and in how creation works, a deformation in all the relationships between people, things and God. God initiated a process to restore creation and all the relationships within it back to their perfect state. This he accomplished through Jesus the Christ. The consummation of this program is promised and assured. When all things are made right there will be peace, justice, goodness, and right relations between all things, all people and God. This biblical metanarrative, or Christ narrative, when adopted as true by believers, shapes their identities by giving them a beginning and a conclusion, and placing them between those endpoints in history. This forms the foundation for significance and meaning for individuals and communities of believers.

From a Christian perspective, Grenz (2002) and Leonard Sweet (2020) both conceive of personal identity as being narrative in character. Sweet strongly asserts that "only narrative builds identity" (Sweet, February 11, 2020a). A narrative is not a conglomeration of random

vignettes placed next to one another; that would be meaningless. The process of telling one's own story places significance on certain events and relationships to demonstrate the self's purpose. It provides "meaning and coherence" to one's self-understanding (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 126).

Narratives differ from facts, descriptors, tags, and adjectives in that stories move through time and are therefore inherently dynamic; they have a direction. Direction is at the heart of purpose, and telos (or end goal) is at the heart of direction. Stories have a beginning and a middle which are leading the interpreter to a specific end. This telos is more than a mere moral or wise lesson; it establishes the meaning for the existence of the story and its players. The telos determines the purpose or significance of the information within the story. "The end shapes the story" (Bass & Fuller, 2022, 52:08). The direction of a story is its purpose; the end of a narrative exposes why the story was told. In a narrative, the meaning of the story gives details particular significance while the purpose of the story gives direction. By telling a story, then, identity answers questions like "Who am I? Why do I exist? Where am I going as a person? What ought I to do?" Human beings understand their own sense of meaning (significance) and purpose (mission) through their identity-narrative; therefore, "the contexts that make sense out of human action are *stories* or *narratives*…. My life as a whole makes sense when my story is told" (Kallenberg in N. C. Murphy et al., 1997, p. 23).

Identity formation is R-E-D. Since identity formation is an aspect of personhood development and personhood development is relational, embodied, and dialectic, so identity formation also manifests a R-E-D nature. Concerning relationality, Trueman (2020) recognizes the social environment necessary for identity formation, saying, "our identities are shaped by our connection to and interaction with significant others … identity arises in the context of

belonging" (p. 57). As personhood forms through the dialectical process of integration and differentiation, a clear sense of identity can take hold. In fact, "at its core" the personhood dynamic of "differentiation has to do with identity" (Balswick et al., 2016, p. 224). Without an identity which recognizes the self as both separate from other individuals and connected to other individuals, mutual knowing of one another would not be possible. This dynamic between personal differentiation and telling the narrative of the self reveals an intimate interweaving between the relational and dialectical natures of identity formation, for only "the [well-]differentiated [person] has a solid sense of identity and is able to sustain intimate relationships" (Balswick et al., 2016, p. 224).

Because identity formation is social, any one person's "story is fundamental to [their] personal identity, but it's not an individual story" (Rosner & Trueman, 2022, p. 119). Though a person may have many roles – father, sister, employee, sibling, teacher – a healthy identity-narrative holds consistently across them. James McClendon (2002) recognizes this when he says, "The roles are narrative; the I who cannot be itself save by means of them is therefore narrative as well" (McClendon, 2002, p. 351). McClendon here conceives of identity as both narrative and relational, for the "roles" which we play are relationships with others. Identity formation is story-making aimed specifically at interpreting one's role in connection with all other people and things. Trueman (2020) calls this the "dialogical nature of identity" (p. 61). In addition to one's immediate family, Rosner (2022) also includes the life contexts of historical family history and national identity as central to the "contexts of belonging" which form the identity-narrative.

Identity formation is also an embodied dynamic. This is because the activities in which we are engaged are the material from which our self-interpreting narrative is built. Identity is not merely a psychological dynamic for "we are inherently bodies entangled in the worlds we

occupy" (Strawn and Brown, 2020, p. 18). Since identity-narrative is formed in relationship with other people, and people are physical beings, it can be said that the "self … exists as an emerging aspect of embodied identity understood in the context of relationship, both with God and with others" (Balswick et al, 2016, p. 24-25). In this quote, Balswick et al. are interweaving the embodied and relational characteristics of identity-narrative. And they understand the self not to be a fixed substance or even an idea but something dynamic that emerges out of the experiences we have had and are having. Strawn and Brown (2020) concur, stating that the "'self' is not something we *have* or *are* but is something that is *evoked* via our *memories* of what we did, or tend to do" (p.48). Because the self is understood as a narrative that interprets our meaning and purpose, and because that narrative is made up of events, and because those events occurred in physical space and time with other people, then the self cannot truly be separated from the physical and embodied "context of the situations of our lives" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 48).

This explains the connection between the embodied and relational natures of personhood, particularly how the two characteristics are related to identity formation. Our immediate context of family, nation, time period, socio-economic condition, and physical health are just some of the important elements deeply influencing identity-formation: "Our idea of our self is built on the actions of our body in the world," and therefore "embodied cognition will always necessarily entail situated cognition" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 48). The narrative that makes up how we interpret ourselves may be internal, but it is made up of a history of actions and interactions which we have performed in real time and space. The embodiedness of our lived out decisions includes the sensory experiences associated with specific geographical contexts including the smells, sounds, sensate feelings, tastes, and sights which create emotionally charged memories. Memory and identity have deep roots in physicality because "to know myself is to know what I

have done in the past and what the actions felt like and what impact they made on the physical or social world in which I was embedded" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 48). No one can know themselves in a disembodied way, outside of the physical world in which every action causes a reaction, physically and socially. Narrative requires location and movement across time, so it could be said that "the human self has no timeless existence outside of the temporal reality that we can only describe in narrative" (Richard Bauckham, 2015, quoted in Rosner & Trueman, 2022, p. 71). The personhood developing processes of integration and individuation result in the consciousness of self as an individual-in-communion. The processes involve both the inner experiences within the self and the physically lived-out experiences with others.

The process of developing an identity involves a dialectical process within the person, the opposite but mutually dependent dynamics of engaging as subject and being engaged as object. Additionally, human beings are able to think about their thinking, acting simultaneously as subject and object, a process often called "metathinking," which is necessary for identity-formation in which the self is both the author and the character in the story. William James (1890) made the distinction between the self as subject and the self as object. The self as *subject* is the "I" that thinks and judges, in the same manner that the subject of a sentence is the performer of the action of a verb. The self as *object* is the "me" about which the "I" is doing the thinking and judging, like the direct object of a verb. He writes, "The words ME, then, and SELF … are OBJECTIVE designations" (James, 1890, p. 319, capitalizations orig.). So when "I" think of "me," "I" is the subject – what James calls the "judging Thought" – and "me" is the object – what James calls the "empirical person" (p.371, capitalizations orig.).

In forming the identity the subject is the self who interprets life; the object is also the same self who is experiencing life. They are the same person. Building one's identity requires

interpreting the meaning of one's own existence in such a way that it creates a meaning and a purpose for the self. Therefore, one is both the teller of the story and the subject of the story. This dynamic is autobiographical and dialectical. In one direction, the act of analyzing the self changes the self as subject. In the other direction, the act of being analyzed changes the self as object. One's perspective is simultaneously affecting and being affected by the meaning one is forming. Likewise, the meaning one is forming is also affecting and being affected by the perspective one adopts in making that meaning. This is the dialectic of subject and object occurring within the processes of integration and individuation in developing personhood. Distinguishing between self as subject and self as object will be crucial in understanding how biblical self-denial builds up and anchors one's identity without any dehumanization. Self-denial is not about denying the self as subject but about changing how the self as subject perceives the self as object.

I have made a distinction between the concepts of self-denial and sacrificial love to allow me to be more specific about why the dynamic of self-denial and sacrificial love are not damaging to personhood development and relational flourishing. In this first chapter I established the relational, embodied and dialectical (R-E-D) nature of personhood development, including identity formation. This conceptual groundwork will allow me to describe the biblical understanding of self-denial. In the next chapter I will look at the specific biblical passages in which Jesus calls his disciples to deny themselves. The contexts of these verses support the idea that Jesus conceived of self-denial as a specific dynamic which develops mature personhood through correct identity formation, and prohibits dehumanizing abuses.

Chapter Two: Self-Denial

In several places in the Gospels, Jesus declares that if anyone is to follow him they must first deny themselves. Some have understood the concept to be a dehumanizing attack on personhood. This misconception has arisen in part from a confusion about the meaning of "self" in the phrase "self-denial." Strawn and Brown (2020) explain how "soul" and "self" are used interchangeably in the North American evangelical context with neither being well defined (p. 18, endnote 3). By exegeting the five biblical passages in which Jesus calls for self-denial, this chapter will show that self-denial does not refer to a demeaning or lessening of the soul or of personhood. Rather, it is a call to renounce oneself as authoritative interpreter of self and life while receiving God as that authoritative interpreter; this is a continual process of tearing down old ways of living to replace them with God's way for humans to live and relate, occurring within a community of faith under the authority of the scriptures. The result is the adoption of a personal identity narrative aligned with reality that provides a sense of value, dignity and purpose. Self-denial is the dynamic that builds a mature personhood-in-community. The chapter will close with a brief explanation of how self-denial's role in identity formation has an R-E-D (Relational, Embodied, Dialectical) nature, as expected for any process related to personhood development.

Historical concepts of self

To understand Jesus's call to self-denial more deeply, it must be recognized that the biblical writers did not hold a twenty-first century picture of selfhood. In his work, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self,* Carl Trueman (2020) sketches the history of the "transformation in how society understands the nature of human selfhood" (p. 20). He references the philosopher Charles Taylor's (1989) book *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* where he

notes the development of an inward focus (as opposed to an outward standard established by society's norms) to determine the self. This inward focus is referred to as "the psychological man" by sociologist Philip Rieff (Trueman, 2020, pp. 44-50). Trueman describes modern people as "finding our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires," what Taylor (1989) calls "expressive individualism" (Trueman, 2020, p. 46), as opposed to more historical understandings of identity.

The contemporary view of personhood differs from the biblical conception of the human self. Ancient Mediterranean conceptions of the self were communal, not individual. One defined oneself through the context of one's family, community, and greater religious myth. Dewey (2004), for example, says,

> In modern Western post-Enlightenment societies the basic unit of society is understood to be the individual self. In such a culture, to renounce oneself comes to mean to renounce one's very individuality. In antiquity, however, and indeed in much of the world still today, the basic unit of society is not the individual person but the basic multi-generational kinship group.… In the place of "renounce self" in Mark 8:34, these statements … spell out that kin is what is to be rejected. (p. 102)

Dewey accurately points out the cultural differences in understanding the self (and therefore self-denial) between contemporary and biblical times. However, equating biblical self-denial with rejecting kinship connections is not the clearest or fullest interpretation of Jesus's call to deny oneself and follow him. Rejecting kinship is an element of self-denial, but not the entire picture. Self-denial seems to be a very specific call that refers exclusively to the relational dynamic between the disciple and God, a dynamic in which the disciple renounces the self *as the*

authoritative life interpreter and receives God in that role. Because life interpretation is at the heart of forming the identity narrative, self-denial centers on exchanging one's self-made identity narrative for the one that God has declared. Self-denial shifts the anchor of the disciple's identity from a self-told story to the Christ metanarrative, assigning dignity, value, significance, and purpose to the individual-in-community. The relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of personhood development finds its telos through self-denial before God. For these reasons, rather than dehumanizing a person, God uses self-denial as the means through which the embodied person-in-community flourishes and matures into the fullness of personhood.

Exegesis of biblical passages concerning self-denial

As a quick overview of the Gospel passages on self-denial, I first offer a table summarizing them. For each passage, I list the exact phrases (from the *English Standard Version Bible*, 2001) used by Jesus to describe self-denial, the contexts within which Jesus is enjoining self-denial, and what is being denied. The last column listing what specifically is being denied is key to understanding why self-denial is not dehumanizing but is better conceptualized as a life-giving identity-exchange that brings fullness and flourishing. All of the elements which Jesus calls his disciples to renounce are aspects of identity-formation. In the history of interpreting these verses, commentators might be identified in two close but separate camps: those that see "dying to the self" as a literal call to be prepared for physical martyrdom, and those that see it more metaphorically or spiritually as a call to renounce previous self-centered and sinful attitudes and actions. These two camps are closely related because ultimately they agree that Jesus is inviting his followers to a deep transformation that includes how they interpret goodness, evil, love, and the meaning and significance of their own existence. I will describe this transformation specifically in terms of identity and authority - replacing the role of ultimate

interpreter of reality from the self to God. I believe the scriptures allow for this perspective and it will apply directly to this paper's psychological and relational questions of dehumanization and abusive relational dynamics.

Passage	*Self-denial phrases*	*Contexts*	*What is denied*
Matthew 10:38-39	"take his cross" "loses his life"	Jesus sending the 12 disciples out to ministry; loving family more than Jesus	Family connections
Matthew 16:24-27	"deny himself" "take up his cross" "loses his life"	Jesus foretells crucifixion; Jesus rebukes Peter's rebuke; setting one's mind on things of God vs. things of man	Old ways of setting the mind; self-direction; physical safety
Mark 8:34-38	"deny himself" "take up his cross" "loses his life"	Jesus foretells crucifixion; Jesus rebukes Peter's rebuke	Self-direction; physical safety
Luke 9:23-24	"deny himself" "take up his cross daily" "loses his life"	Jesus foretells his crucifixion	Self-direction; physical safety
Luke 14:26-33	"hate his life" "bear his own cross" "renounce all that he has"	Dinner at a Pharisee's house: humble yourself; bless those who cannot repay; hate your father and mother; salt without taste is thrown away	Pride; worldly success; family connections; everything

Figure 3. *Phrases used, contexts, and what is being denied in Gospel passages where Jesus enjoins self-denial.*

Matthew 10:38-39. Matthew 10:38-39 (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001) says, "And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." While this passage does not actually use the phrase "deny himself" as most of the others do, it contains the related ideas of taking up the cross and losing one's life. These verses are a part of Jesus's discourse preparing his disciples to be sent to multiple villages to cast out demons and to "heal every disease and every affliction" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Matt. 10:1, 8). It appears that in this particular case the instructions are for a distinct and early stage in Jesus's ministry because they begin with a command not to go to Gentiles or Samaritans (Matt. 10:5). For this reason, it is doubtful that Jesus was referring to a literal physical death through crucifixion when he spoke of taking up the cross. Therefore, this should be considered a metaphor to describe a different kind of death than a literal physical one. Craig Blomberg (1992), recognizing that this teaching comes quite early in Jesus's ministry, thinks Jesus "may be using the phrase 'take his cross' as simply implying a willingness to sacrifice one's life, if necessary" (p. 181). He considers that while the immediate context refers to the *prospect* of literal martyrdom, the principle "may be applied to many situations" (Blomberg, 1992, p. 181), including psychological and emotional ones.

Historically, commentators have understood this verse along a spectrum spanning from literal to metaphorical. Some took it literally to mean preparation for martyrdom by crucifixion. Others understood it in a more metaphorical way to encourage the disciples to adopt a regular attitude of humility. In the early days of the fledgling Christian church taking up one's cross and following Jesus could very likely mean a literal sacrifice of your body due to Roman persecution.

Whether Jesus intended this phrase to refer to literal physical martyrdom in this specific context or not, early Christians accepted this teaching on taking up one's cross as encouragement to face death with assurance of his strengthening presence. They were confident that their souls would be received by him. As persecution from the empire lessened and then disappeared, the memory of this difficult period persisted for some time, and the church recognized that serious persecution could rise again. Origen takes the literal approach, describing "taking up the cross" as a rejection of the fear of death and "facing death for the sake of the truth" (Simonetti, 2001, p. 50).

One hundred years later, Hilary of Poitiers, a bishop in the mid-fourth century, interprets this Matthean passage in a spiritual way so that "taking up the cross" includes the renunciation of sinful ways of thinking and acting (Simonetti, 2001, p. 211). Commenting on this verse, he explains, "as we shed our former self with its sins and unfaithfulness and are made new by the Spirit in mind and body, we will necessarily detest the habits of our old, inborn way of life" (Simonetti, 2001, p. 211). Hilary describes taking up our own cross as the way in which we spiritually "suffer, die and are buried and resurrected together with [Christ]" (Simonetti, 2001, p. 213). Making a spiritual application of this sort from Jesus's teachings was a common hermeneutical approach for most theologians of the time (C. A. Hall, 1998 esp. pp. 85-92).

A century later in *Incomplete Work on Matthew,* an anonymous work written sometime in the fifth century, the author explains, "the man who bears his own cross is one who, if necessary, is ready to face any danger for the sake of God, up to and including death, rather than abandon Christ…. It is better to die for God's sake and live eternally than to live for the sake of human interests and suffer eternal death" (Simonetti, 2001, p. 212). Here, Jesus's use of "cross" is taken in a literal manner; following Christ may likely include torture and physical death.

Symeon the New Theologian, writing just after the turn of the first millennium, accepts earlier interpretations of physical death but adds a more internal psychological one as well. He attributes the changing circumstances in church history as informing his adoption of a more metaphorical application of the phrase "take up the cross." "In times past," he writes, "when heresies prevailed, many chose death through martyrdom and various tortures. Now, when we through the grace of Christ live in a time of profound and perfect peace, we learn for sure that cross and death consist in nothing else than the complete putting to death of self-will" (Just, 2003, p. 241). Symeon sounds very modern, for in forms similar to his, most contemporary commentators simultaneously hold both a literal and metaphorical/psychological position.

For example, Mark Medley (2012), in his work on Rowan Williams' theology, notes that for the former archbishop of Canterbury "the public performance of martyrdom … is chiefly witnessed in the undramatic, mundane and ordinary routines and activities of daily life" (p. 476). However, Archbishop Williams is quick to recognize that he is speaking out of a specific cultural milieu in which literal martyrdom is not a high probability, and adds a caveat for those Christians living in more physically dangerous contexts for believers: "not to say that martyrdom is not a possibility latent in Christian existence" (Medley, 2012, p. 476). Those who interpret "taking up the cross" more metaphorically and psychologically still recognize the reality of other places across the globe in which there is serious cultural resistance to Christ-followers. The attitude that is ready to be literally martyred is also ready to deny themselves psychologically by loving others even absent the threat of physical harm or death.

The preceding context of Matthew 10 concerns the division which occurs in family relationships when some believe in Jesus and others do not. Following Christ in a sinful world will require prioritizing Jesus above familial bonds. "Whoever loves father and mother more than

me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (v.37). Jesus equates the spiritual attitude which prefers parents or children over obedience to God with refusing the cross. "Taking the cross" in Matthew 10:38, then, contains an underlying call to choose Christ above familial relationships. It will feel like death because family was central to Jewish culture, life, and personal identity. Rejecting parents and children for the sake of faithfulness to Christ brings social, emotional, and psychological pain and suffering , for "in a society where the family was the basic socio-economic unit, the loss that the early Christians suffered in this regard [to family relationships] can never be exaggerated. Their allegiance to Christ brought a wedge in their closest and most intimate relationships, those within their own families" (Rabali, 2006, p. 90).

Within the context of familial relationships, "losing life" and "finding life" would not seem to be referring to physical life but rather to all the social relationships that make up a person's status, to one's sense of belonging within a community, and to identity. Later in his ministry Jesus promises his disciples that "there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Matt. 19:29). Jesus promises that the faithful disciple will receive *in this life* a new community and social identity as well as everlasting existence. The material and social goods which one gives up ("losing life") in order to follow Jesus will be replaced in the body of Christ, the church ("finding life").

This passage in Matthew 10 is different from the next three self-denial passages in that Jesus's own crucifixion is not in the immediate context. For Rosner (2022) this is part of the

reason why he interprets this saying as specifically addressing "what we mean by personal identity" (p. 190). He sees Jesus's phrase "find yourself" as equivalent to "the self-made self" (Rosner, 2022, p. 190). He sums up Jesus's meaning as "seeking to establish your own identity results in losing your identity" (Rosner, 2022, p. 190-191).

Although Matthew does not mention here "self-denial" as a specific term, the attitudinal transformation necessary to prioritize one's relationship with Jesus over family and society, and to prefer death over unfaithfulness to Jesus, requires a deep inner reorientation that moves from valuing the self to valuing God above all other relationships. To follow Jesus, one's identity can no longer be defined by one's social position or relationships in one's family and community; it must be understood in relation to God as Lord. One must receive the identity narrative that God offers through Christ, renouncing the identity one has previously assumed. Therefore, whether Jesus's teaching here is taken as referring to a literal crucifixion or the metaphorical putting to death of previous social positions and the renunciation of sinful desires, the root of the transformation taking place is one of identity. When the disciple renounces a self-centered narrative to explain their significance and purpose, and adopts God's authoritative interpretation of their place in creation, then avoiding death is no longer valued above faithfully following the way of Jesus.

Matthew 16:24-27 and Mark 8:34-38. Matthew 16:24-27 and its two parallel passages (Mark 8:34-38 and Luke 9:23-24) add the phrase "deny himself" to the concept of carrying one's cross:

> If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world

> and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Matt. 16:24-27)

As in the previous Matthean passage, commentators throughout church history have wrestled with whether taking up the cross and denying the self is fundamentally attitudinal or if Jesus is speaking literally about physically dying. Origen in the third century saw this concept of losing one's life in two ways: from the disciple's perspective, it is a rejection of the world's values and purposes to assume Christ's; from the world's perspective, the disciple has lost everything important. So, according to Origen, the one who refuses to give up all things because of a worldly approach to reality "manages his own life in order to live well according to the flesh…[and] removes it beyond the boundaries of blessedness" (Simonetti, 2002, p. 50).

Chrysostom in the fourth century takes Jesus's words here more literally and warns his hearers, "it will be impossible for you even to be saved, unless you are continually prepared for death" (Simonetti, 2002, p. 49). More recently, Paul Tanner (2013) explains Jesus's words to mean considering one's physical life as less important than obedient love for Jesus: "Obviously, Jesus was not instructing his followers to go out and carry literal crosses; rather he used this imagery to make a point. They were to consider themselves prepared to suffer to the point of death" (Tanner, 2013, p. 48).

This willingness and attitudinal preparedness to actually die for the faith seems to be a consensus for modern interpreters of Jesus's call for taking up the cross in self-denial. While physical execution for one's faith is improbable in Western society today, following Jesus will nevertheless necessitate an attitude that is willing to receive any level of persecution, even to the

point of death, at the hand of oppressors in order to maintain faithfulness to Jesus as Lord. Ensor's (2002) comments are a good example of this more psychological application: "At face value, this is a call to self-renunciation and readiness for martyrdom … but at the same time it clearly does not necessarily imply that every disciple would in a literal sense be crucified: it is the *attitude* of regarding one's life as in one sense 'already finished' that is the key point" (Ensor, 2002, p. 103, emph. orig.). Ensor's (2002) use of the phrase self-renunciation requires some clarification, for here lies the crux of the claim that self-denial is dehumanizing. In Ensor's context, self-renunciation seems to mean placing one's faithfulness to Christ above one's innate self-protection; incorrectly understood, this could lead to accepting abusive relational dynamics as inherently Christian and keep an abused person from resisting or escaping such dehumanization.

I claim that the reprioritization referenced by Ensor (2002) above arises out of a new identity, received from God through accepting his interpreting narrative of self and the world. The new identity narrative tells the story of God as Creator and Lord and worthy of one's complete devotion. This new narrative places the disciple in the midst of a story in which God is the highest good and able to be known. In knowing God and being known by him, truth, beauty, and goodness are enlarged from mere ethical concepts to become a Person, Jesus Christ. The disciple experiences Jesus as the Ultimate Good, and all other activities and attitudes become ways to know and serve him more deeply. Faithfulness to that relationship becomes more important than self-protection. Alongside the new mission arising from this identity-narrative come significance and dignity to the disciple. Abuse denies this significance and dignity and therefore can be resisted, even as an attitude of self-denial toward God is maintained. In fact,

self-denial before God creates the context in which resisting abuse becomes the moral obligation of the believer.

Tanner (2013) sees the attitude of willingness to die as the same mindset that creates a daily renouncing of self-centeredness: "Although the idea of bearing one's cross implies first and foremost the willingness to ultimately die for Christ, it would also include (by way of application) a total claim upon the disciple's allegiance and the relinquishment of all his resources for the cause of Christ. Nothing less than a total surrender of one's self will do" (Tanner, 2013, p. 49). Tanner's "total surrender of one's self" would include the deeply interior renouncing of self as life-interpreter and receiving God in that role, with all the implications that come along with it. Note that this relinquishment and surrender is in relation to Christ, not other people. When disciples relinquish and surrender self-will and self-definition to Jesus, then they cannot do so in relation to other people. Jesus's definition of the disciple's purpose and significance overrules any other person's claim to submission or deference.

D. A. Carson describes this as "a kind of death to self" and sees it not so much as "a prerequisite of discipleship as a continuing characteristic of it" (in Gaebelein, 1984, p. 379). Note his phrase death *to* self, not *of* self. This terminology allows for personhood to remain even as the self-as-interpreter-of-all-things is replaced with a God-centered self-hermeneutic. The denial of self is not a weakening of personhood, nor a consideration of oneself as unimportant or worthy of denigration. Rather, Jesus is teaching that discipleship requires a replacing of self-as-god with God as the center of the life. This means that God determines the direction and purpose of the disciple's life, for "discipleship requires above all a denial of self. The taking up of the cross could only come as a result of imitating Jesus's own model in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'Not my will but thine be done'" (Stoutenburg, 1993, p. 178). Denying the self is a negation in

the sense that one's previous purposes, directions, values and priorities – all determined by one's self-defined identity narrative – are renounced. In that renunciation, the disciple dialectically receives new purposes, directions, values and priorities that arise from living with and loving God through Jesus in the Spirit. And so we hear Jesus calling us to deny the self (a negation), but dialectically also to follow him (a substantiation).

This exhortation from Jesus immediately follows his foretelling of his crucifixion. Because Peter misunderstands Jesus's mission and the necessity of his sacrificial death, he rebukes Jesus for speaking of the torture and death of the Messiah. Jesus rebukes Peter's rebuke, calling him a satanic hindrance to his purposes. Then Jesus says that Peter is not setting his mind "on the things of God, but on the things of man" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Matt. 16:23). Here "denying himself" refers to putting away from his heart "the things of man" vis-à-vis the "things of God." Some consider Peter's grievous error as caused by "not thinking from God's viewpoint" (Walvoord et al., 1983, p. 59; for a dissenting view see Wheaton, 2015, p. 42). Instead of arising from God's perspective of reality which understands self-denial as the way to ultimate victory, "the criticism of Peter toward Jesus arises from mere human thought" (Bayer, 2012, p. 77). The natural manner by which human beings measure, judge, and desire must cease to be – metaphorically, must be crucified – and only then can a person adopt a godly perspective in which God is interpreter, meaning-maker, measurer, judge, and highest desire. Denying one's self, then, "means to submit one's human thoughts to God's thoughts ... to his will, his plan, and his purposes.… You submit to what God wants you to think and to do. You exchange your will for his will" (Tanner, 2013, p. 47). I would add that you renounce your identity-narrative in order to receive the one God declares about you, for it is from one's identity-narrative that all other

relationships are measured and interpreted. It is one's identity narrative that directs and motivates one's decisions and actions. One's self-mission is replaced with God's mission.

Parallel to "denying one's self" and "taking up the cross," Jesus speaks of "losing one's life." All these terms seem to be referring to what one might term a person's center, heart, or identity. This is our inner motivation, the main purpose – or god – for which we make decisions, and the narrative story by which we give meaning to our existence. We are called to continually deny, reject, and renounce the self-centered reasons why we live, choose, love, and respond throughout all our relationships and we can begin to dialectically adopt the relational and embodied context of living with God and others. We are to replace self-as-authoritative-interpreter with a new center that seeks to glorify the one true God. This is the change of *metanoia*, repentance. When we respond to God with repentance and faith, he enters in and this new relationship becomes the context in which we work with the Spirit and the means of his grace – such as a community of faith seeking to live according to the scriptures – to take on a transformed identity. As we mature spiritually, we will increasingly understand our identity through the narrative of the New Covenant in which we find ourselves in Christ and belong to his community. The old identity narrative was leading to death and judgment; the newly adopted one leads to true life and reconciliation with our Creator.

Several commentators take special care in clarifying that the self-denial to which Jesus calls his disciples does not dehumanize. For example, in his *Screwtape Letters,* C. S. Lewis (1942) puts these words in the mouth of God's enemy: "When [God] talks of their losing their selves, he means only abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, he really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly his they will be more themselves than ever" (quoted in Bayer, 2012, p. 102). Blomberg

(1992), too, makes it clear that "self-denial does not imply self-abuse or lack of self-esteem" (p. 260). In fact he claims that Jesus's disciples "should have a better self-image than any other people," though he emphasizes that their esteem is based on God's grace, not their own merit. This self-image, as it arises out of God's interpreting narrative, is better than the old one because it is true, because it perceives God as the center of all creation, and because it gives the disciple the proper dignity, value, and mission which they rightly deserve, and which allows for a sacrificial love that does not encourage abusive dynamics.

Bayer (2012) also seeks to avoid any interpretation or application of this concept that leads to dehumanization when he says, "Far from becoming less of a person in Christ, each disciple develops his/her full personality and gifting" (p. 50). Instead of weakening personhood, the self-denial to which Jesus calls his disciples creates the inner environment for maturity and Christlikeness.

> As people … put their trust in God, follow his ways, and receive his mercy, they do not become less human. Rather, they develop and flourish. The effect of our alienation from God is, fundamentally, depersonalizing.… The work of God in and through Christ to pursue us in love restores us to wholeness and personhood. Salvation means, among many other things, restoration to the image of God. (Bayer, 2012, p.102)

Because flourishing is the foundational understanding of God's purpose for us, the call to self-denial includes a rejection of self-negation and self-denigration. Rather than self-abasement, Jesus's call to self-denial is a summons "to the surrender of control. This includes surrendering to God the self-abasing inner voice as a form of 'negative pride.' You are not meant to calculate your worth" (Bayer, 2012, p.103). Bayer here is getting very close to the concepts I am

proposing to describe self-denial. The identity-narrative God gives the disciple in Christ brings belonging, cleansing, adoption, gifting, community, mission, and more. Disciples become valuable players in a grander story than the one they were telling themselves previously, before renouncing the self as authoritative interpreter.

Mark 8:34-38 is a parallel passage to Matthew 16:24-27 with identical contexts; the only addition is a brief mention of being ashamed of Christ: "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father and the angels" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Mark 8:38). The dynamic of being ashamed of Jesus includes rejecting his offer to define the self in relationship to reality according to his grace. But for the one who is not ashamed of Jesus, social status, community acceptance, and personal advancement are no longer considered worthy goals for which to strive. The disciple who follows Jesus will instead hold the relationship with God as primary and self-defining. Since human personhood is dialectically formed, Jesus understands one cannot take on his new source of identity without also renouncing the first self-authored one.

Self-denial in order to follow Jesus is the renouncing of the self as the center of life – as the measuring stick by which we measure worth of other things and people – and replacing it with God as the center of life. Mark Strauss (2014) sees self-denial as renouncing one's "own ambitions" in order to "follow Jesus wholly, even to the point of death" (p. 370). Grant Osborne (2014) defines the denial of self as "the rejection of the ascendancy of self, a refusal to allow self-interest to guide one's life" (p. 2). Osborne and Strauss are speaking of one's telos, which is made conscious to the disciple through the identity narrative. Instead of self-satisfaction and self-protection being the telos of life, loving God and others becomes the new telos and they bring a

new way to find satisfaction which motivates the disciple to love God and others, even if it means physical death. It is an important distinction to recognize the telos as faithfulness to God and not as seeking death due to faithfulness to God, for "Mark 8:34 is not an exhortation to suffering and victimage in general. It is an exhortation to remain faithful to Jesus and the rule of God in the face of persecution, even execution, by political authorities" (Dewey, 2004, p. 103).

Luke 9:23-24 & 14:26-33. In Luke's Gospel, there are two passages containing Jesus's call for self-denial (Luke 9:23-24; 14:26-33). In Luke 9:23, the addition of the word "daily" to the concept of taking up the cross significantly affects interpretation and application. Both Lukan passages are given below. The ellipses in the second pericope are skipping over Jesus's two illustrations of counting the cost of building a tower and waging war.

> And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Luke 9:23-24)
>
> If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple…. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (*English Standard Bible,* 2001, Luke 14:26-33)

Mark Strauss (2014) rejects the ideas that self-denial is describing a lifestyle of asceticism or that taking up the cross is describing a generalized sense of standing up under trouble. He explains his definition of the concept by saying, "to 'deny oneself' does not mean to live a life of … self-discipline. It is to renounce your claim to yourself … and to submit to Christ

as his slave. It is a denial of autonomy and self-sufficiency" (p. 372). Like the commentators of the previous passages on self-denial, Strauss (2014) sees both literal and metaphorical senses to taking up the cross. For some, they will physically be killed for their faithfulness to Christ; others will maintain the prioritization of faithfulness over self-preservation, but will not actually be martyred. He explains that taking up the cross "means to subject oneself to excruciating and shameful execution by crucifixion. Of course, this will not mean an actual martyrdom for all, but a willingness to renounce all for Christ. Luke explicitly introduces this metaphorical sense by adding 'daily'" (Strauss, 2014, p.372). For Strauss the inner experience of self-denial produces external expressions. The inner dynamic of renouncing "your claim to yourself" is an identity transformation. One no longer belongs to oneself but to another; one's lord has changed and therefore one's self-definition has been transformed as well. The new lord re-interprets one's relationships, loves, and priorities. Even one's history and origin is understood from a different perspective which changes one's telos.

In the second Lukan quote, Jesus combines the idea of self-denial with rejecting familial bonds if necessary for following him. Malina (1996) makes connections between rejecting familial obligations, self-denial, and taking up the cross: "Since renouncing one's kin group is parallel to taking up the cross, it would seem from this saying that such renunciation is equally much like self-denial" (Malina, 1996, p. 107, see also Dewey, 2004, p. 102). As I described above, the sense of self in biblical times was inseparably interwoven with the idea of the nuclear as well as extended family, village community, and Jewish ethnicity itself. Since one's identity narrative was formed within the contexts of these circles, to renounce one's family was to lose one's self, in the sense of no longer defining oneself by these particular relationships. Jacobs

(2003) also recognizes the close connection between identity and family when he states that interpreting family relationships "turns out to serve…purposes of identity construction" (p. 228).

Additionally, in the context of this passage, Jesus is eating at a Pharisee's house and teaching about humility and about giving to those who cannot repay. Jesus is calling his disciples to reject social positions, wealth, and worldly success. While these three are not inherently wicked (Jewish proverbs actually connect them with godly wisdom), striving for them may reveal a heart of self-centeredness and pride. By completely reversing the worldly way of determining value and status, Jesus is presenting an "alternate view of reality" (Brawley, 2020, p. 144). In other words, Jesus is redefining how relationships work and what they mean; this is a product of life-interpretation, that is, of identity narrative. The value I place on myself in relation to others is a product of my identity. By upturning natural ways of assigning value and significance, Jesus is offering new identities to both the "self-absorbed diners" (Spencer, 2019, p. 367) and those of low status, humanly speaking.

Speaking specifically of those with low social status, Grant (2001) believes that "those with a weak or non-existent sense of self (ego identity) need first to be empowered to the point of developing a 'true self' or ego. Later, their ego must be voluntarily surrendered in full awareness of its inadequacies" (p. 57). I would suggest that biblically this appears to be a single step, not two. The problem of a "weak or non-existent sense of self" can be resolved through the single step of accepting Jesus's interpretation of the person. He grants dignity and a certain freedom to those who adopt his metanarrative as explaining their identity; to the great (in the eyes of the world) this is a humbling experience, but to the lowly (in the eyes of the world) this can be an uplifting one. What Grant sees as a two-step process I see as a dialectical process of renouncing

and receiving, a relational dynamic between the disciple and God in building the disciple's true identity.

Self-denial is an identity-forming dynamic

In summary, concerning the five passages in which Jesus calls for self-denial, throughout history commentators have landed on several related but distinct places in interpreting "taking up one's cross" and "denying the self." Some believe it refers to mentally preparing the self for physical martyrdom; others to denying the flesh, or resisting temptation; others to rejecting one's self-centered desires and purposes. I conclude that all three of these options in essence relate to a change in one's identity-narrative and self-definition. All of the things to be renounced which are listed in the far right column of Figure Three are deeply related to the contemporary conception of one's identity. Prioritizing one's connection to Jesus over one's familial history, tradition, and relationships is an identity issue. When Jesus confronts Peter with his old ways of setting the mind, he is telling him that he needs to change how he interprets and moves in the world, including how he evaluates, prioritizes, loves, and makes goals. Because one's evaluations, priorities, loves, and goals are given direction and meaning through one's identity-narrative, it can be said that Jesus is calling Peter to renounce himself as the determiner of such valuations and to receive God's hermeneutic about them. This is deeply related to identity-narrative.

Self-denial also concerns renouncing self-direction. When disciples decide to follow Jesus, they are no longer free to set their own course, to decide their own significance, meaning, purpose, or mission. These are all derived from one's identity-narrative. Similarly, one's personal safety and one's worldly success are put at risk when deciding to follow Jesus, who himself suffered and was crucified. Remaining faithful to the course Jesus lays out for the disciple may result in loss of status, loss of physical possessions, or even death. Self-denial is the

dynamic that considers perseverance in obedience higher than one's existence on earth. It requires a revolutionary transformation of one's interpretation of reality – that is, one's identity-narrative – to prioritize faithfulness to God over self-protection.

Pride is also renounced in Jesus's idea of self-denial. Pride arises from an identity-narrative that tells the story as if the individual were the focus of the story. It is more than assuming one is better than others; pride is believing that one has the authority to determine one's purpose, whether that is determined to be a grand or a denigrating one. Pride expresses itself in making one's own identity, whether it is making oneself larger or lesser than is true. Giving up this authority to decide the self's meaning and mission is so central to one's personhood that it can be described as dying to the self or as taking up the cross.

Grant (2001), in speaking of the spiritual journey with Christ, recognizes that the transformational confrontation with Jesus incurs an "identity loss" (p. 57). In the call to follow Jesus "one is confronted with the multitude of ways that one has uncritically adopted versions of self, God and reality, in the service of self-sufficiency and self-centeredness" (Grant, 2001, p. 57). What Grant (2001) calls "uncritically adopted versions of self," I would call "false identities", unaligned with the truth about self, God, and reality. Using psychological terminology, Grant (2001) describes the necessity of conversion by saying "the ego needs to be toppled and repositioned in relation to the Self and Spirit" (p. 57). My schema agrees, though I use the terms "renounce" and "receive" to describe the deconstruction and reconstruction of one's identity-narrative. Conversion is exchanging who sits on the throne of authoritative meaning-making. Through the discipleship process, the disciple is transformed by continually accepting God's assignment of value and meaning.

Grant's (2001) phrase concerning a "weak or non-existent sense of self" is a description of a dehumanized person. Spencer (2019) says that calling to humility such a person who is "lowly and downtrodden would only reinforce their position and further serve established hierarchical interests" (p. 370). However, he is conflating the ideas of self-denial before God and sacrificial love toward other people. Humility does not dehumanize when it describes a deference to God. Pride is not necessarily holding oneself as higher than others but ultimately is holding oneself as a higher authority than God in defining the self. If someone considers themselves of low value, Jesus's call to deny the self means renouncing the low vision of the self brought about by one's false identity narrative and receiving God's vision of one's value, significance, and purpose. In this way, self-denial for those of high social status will appear as a reduction in that status while self-denial for those of low social status will appear as a lifting of that status. As James wrote in his letter: "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, James 1:9-10). Self-denial brings both of these dynamics to life.

In Luke 14:33 Jesus sums up self-denial as renouncing everything. Self-denial takes aim at the deepest dynamics which make a person know themselves as a person and know others, including God. Self-denial exchanges one's self-determined answers for God's authoritative answers to the questions of one's significance and purpose. In self-denial the answers to questions like "Who am I? Why am I here? What makes me significant? What ought I to do? Who decides my worth and purpose?" are answered by God instead of the self. *Jesus's call to self-denial can be seen as renouncing one's identity-making authority and giving it to God.* This is a continual process for the disciple, as temptations to take back that authority arise throughout life. Since one's understanding of the self is developed and confirmed within one's relationships,

living among God's people who agree with God on a person's worth, dignity, meaning and mission deeply supports the self-denying work the Spirit continues to bring into a disciple's life.

Psychologists recognize the human ability to know about one's identity and to change one's conception of oneself. Martin, Sugarman & Thompson (2003) write, "People are self-conscious and capable of self-knowledge.… Humans can become aware of how they are classified within their groups, societies, and cultures and can experience themselves in particular ways as a consequence of these classifications" (p.10). Their terminology of "experiencing the self" is referring to one's identity. Because identity is the result of interpretation, when one alters one's interpretation of the importance, value or meaning of one's contexts, then one's identity is changed. An aspect of human personhood is the freedom to "alter their classifications. Because human psychological beings are agents who are aware and reflective, their courses of action and ways of being are affected not only by the classifications of societies and cultures but also by their own conceptions of, and reactions to, such classifications" (Sugarman & Thompson, 2003, pp. 10–11). This shows a close connection between the individual and their relationships in forming identity, emphasizing the importance of godly brothers and sisters in developing right and true personhood before God and others.

This exchange of authority in defining the self which occurs between the disciple and God runs wider and deeper than merely adopting a different worldview. Smith (2009) understands worldview as concerning mostly beliefs, ideas, and doctrine while self-formation involves transforming the heart and its desires from which decisions and actions are engaged (pp. 17-18): "This doesn't require rejecting worldview talk, only situating it in relation to Christian practices" (J. K. A. Smith, 2009, p. 11). This is why talking about identity-formation seems to better encompass the wideness of life change involved in self-denial and in personhood

development than speaking of a merely cognitive worldview. Narrative affects more than the intellect of the hearer; it engages the emotions and judgment, and stirs up one's sense of morality and dignity. Narrative seeks to make clear the end and purpose of the story; identity-narrative makes clear the end and purpose of one's existence in relation to all other things in existence. So, "instead of focusing on what Christians *think*, distilling Christian faith into an intellectual summary formula (a 'worldview')," self-denial and identity formation focus on "what Christians *do*, articulating the shape of a Christian 'social imaginary'" (J. K. A. Smith, 2009, p. 11).

Since self-denial is about personhood development, specifically who authoritatively speaks one's identity-narrative, it reflects the R-E-D nature of personhood development. Self-denial is relational because it involves an exchange between two persons – between a human person and the divine Person – and because life interpretation has to do with one's connection to all other things in creation. One's life-narrative is a story about what has happened in the past and in specific locations, from before one is born to the present moment and on to eternity. One's actions in time and space both express and develop one's identity as a self-denying disciple of Jesus; therefore, self-denial is inherently embodied. Self-denial is also dialectical, for it involves the interdependent processes of renouncing and receiving. One renounces the right to determine meaning and purpose of oneself. Simultaneously and to the same degree, one receives the significance and mission that God offers through a new identity-narrative. God speaks to the disciple (relationally); the disciple lets go of previous self-concepts while receiving God's story of why things are (dialectically); and then the disciple walks with God to participate in this new metanarrative towards the new telos (embodied). Here there is fullness of personhood and rejection of dehumanization.

Part Two: Sacrificial Love and Communal Flourishing

Part One demonstrated that the biblical conception of self-denial in relation to God is not a dehumanizing experience. Part Two will demonstrate that rather than perpetuating abusive relational dynamics, sacrificial love for other people is the dynamic through which God brings redemptive goodness and communal flourishing into the world. When the R-E-D (Relational, Embodied, Dialectical) nature of sacrificial love is emphasized, awareness of pseudo-loves which sometimes produce abusive dynamics are exposed and can be rejected. When a disciple receives the love of God, the love of self is sanctified and becomes a motivation for loving others. Then the disciple can recognize abusive behaviors, confront them and prayerfully work toward transforming them. Wisdom is required to know what is right in any particular situation, guarding against self-deception and encouraging boldness for truth in love. These three then, wisdom, sanctified self-love, and the R-E-D nature of biblical love, will keep sacrificial loving from becoming abusive or dehumanizing.

Chapter Three lays out the dynamics and nature of love in general. Love is broadly defined as benevolent giving. Benevolence refers to an internal motivation for the other's good expressed in external actions. Ultimately, love desires intimate connection with the beloved; unfortunately, the reality is that this is not always possible. Intimacy occurs when two people honestly open themselves to one another and freely receive the other, a mutual reciprocal showing and knowing. The R-E-D aspects of love, like those same aspects of personhood development, will be shown to prevent abusive dynamics. Because love is relational it will require self-awareness as well as acceptive listening. Because human love is embodied, it considers the limitations and needs of the self and the other in order to prevent patterns that abuse either one. The dialectical nature of love is twofold; there is an intended reciprocity

between the giver and receiver, and the act of giving in itself is beneficial to the giver. Conceptually at least, this allows for the possibility of sacrificial love being non-abusive. “A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Proverbs 11:17).

Chapter Four discusses specifically how loving relationships with asymmetrical sacrificial dynamics need not lead to abuse. Sacrificial love occurs when one chooses not to receive a certain good for oneself in order to allow the other to receive a certain good. Anchoring one’s identity in the Christ metanarrative models and motivates disciples toward sacrificial love while affirming the value, dignity, and freedom of both the lover and the beloved. The example and teaching of Christ also reveal wisdom in determining what is good in particular situations. The works of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, which distinguish between proper and improper love of self, shed some light on the interplay between one’s love of God, love of others, and love of self. When sacrificial love is experienced within a biblical understanding, noting its R-E-D characteristics, abusive dynamics can be identified and confronted, and communal interactions can flourish to the benefit of all.

Chapter Three: Love is R-E-D Benevolent Giving

Just as a healthy schema of personhood development reveals how it resists dehumanization (as demonstrated in Part One), so an accurate schema of love reveals how it prevents the perpetuation of abusive dynamics. For the sake of this dissertation I will use a simple definition of love: *the desire for the good of the other, expressed in actions*. This definition involves motivation, action, and passion. Love has similar aspects to those I have described for personhood development: relational, embodied, and dialectical (R-E-D). From a Christian perspective, the relational aspect of love is seen not only in it involving at least two people, but also in the biblical idea that it is one's relationship with God that makes loving others possible. The embodied aspect of love allows for physical expression, joy and connection while inherently entailing boundaries. Recognizing and honoring the limitations of the self and others can serve to prevent abusive dynamics. The dialectical aspect of love is seen in the mutuality of giving and receiving between two people as well as in the nature of giving which results in receiving, not as an explicit return from the beloved, but inherent in the very act of giving itself (Stauffer, Janet, various conversations in Spring 2023). The purpose of understanding the nature of love is to help identify any abusive attitudes or behavior patterns as pseudo-loves, in order to resist them and replace them with a love closer to the biblical understanding of it.

The first element in the definition of love is benevolence, an attitude which is motivated by and works for the good of another person. Christians seek to love as God loves and they believe "God's love is seeking the highest good in the one loved" (Hoehner, 1984, p. 659). Hall and Hall (2021) include both the inner motivation and the external expression in their definition of benevolent love: "desiring and acting toward the good of the other" (p. 187). The Christian scriptures state that loving God displays itself in loving others; love is the central goal and

experience of Christians (Matt. 22:37-39 and parallels; 1 John 4:7-11). E. L. Johnson (2017) says, “Christians believe that an auto-centric orientation cannot satisfy human beings for very long…We need a personal God who loves us and we can love” (pp. 29-30). Here we see a hint of the dialectical nature of love. Centering life on the self is ultimately unsatisfying, even though the self-centered life strives for satisfaction through getting. It is in renouncing the self as center, replacing it with God as one’s purpose and significance, that satisfaction is found. It is in loving God and others, that is, thinking about and striving for their good, that brings personal fulfillment and communal flourishing. For the Christian, one’s loving relationship with God through the repentance and transformation of self-denial brings love into one’s relationships with others.

Non-Christians such as Fromm (2013) also see benevolence as integral to love: “Love is the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love” (p. 50), which he specifically states “implies the absence of exploitation” (p. 52). An exploiter is not concerned for the flourishing of the other and so is not acting in a loving way. Neither is the one being exploited, if they refuse to confront the exploitative behavioral patterns of the other. Ultimately, due to the dialectical nature of giving, abusive dynamics are not beneficial for the lover or the beloved, neither for the abused nor the abuser. Exploiting another degrades one’s own personhood, for it works against the purpose and meaning of one’s existence, to live in and for the love of Christ which gives us significance, value and dignity.

Love is more than an internal motivation toward benevolence; it includes action for the good of another. The goodness of benevolence is therefore inherently both relational and embodied. Fromm (2013) states, “Genuine love … is not an ‘affect’ in the sense of being affected by somebody, but an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person, rooted in one’s own capacity to love” (p. 95). The desire and motivation for the good of the other

is not love until it is acted out. Benevolence without tangible expression is mere well-wishing. The biblical author James asks, “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, James 2:15-16). This explains why contemporary authors insist that “love … produces benevolent actions toward the object of love” (Saucy, 2013, p. 196).

The action element of benevolence means it must be embodied in the physical world. Benevolence acts in time and space, often with the intention of benefiting the physical health of the embodied other. Sometimes the action of benevolent love is the mere physical presence of the lover to give companionship and a sense that the beloved is not alone but belongs and is connected to others. Benevolent action might involve a physical touch of encouragement, providing warmth, or food, or physical protection. Physical presence and physical gifts are messages of love that can be felt and handled, smelled and seen and heard and therefore more readily believed and more readily settled into the beloved’s understanding of the self as beloved.

Benevolence requires knowing what is good

A complex factor of benevolence is its reliance on moral reasoning; one must know what is good in order to work toward it (Schlabach, 2001). The goodness of an action is not merely held in the essence of it; it also involves the purpose for which the action is moving. In other words, the goodness of any particular action includes the end to which the action is pointed, the motivation. To strive for another’s growth and happiness requires understanding what direction the growth ought to take and what brings happiness. Encouraging growth requires knowing what is immature and what is closer to maturity, what is empty and what is full, what floundering looks like and what flourishing looks like. In other words, one’s telos determines how one

understands the goodness of a motivation and an action. However, according to Strawn and Brown's (2020) understanding of Alasdair Macintyre (1984), "culture has primarily given up its convictions about a telos – that is, the good life that is the endpoint or goal for which human life was created" (p. 92). Thus, contemporary culture has in general lost its ability to understand what is truly good, from a biblically teleological view.

This loss of a cultural telos comes in part from losing a metanarrative into which one's individual and communal identity narratives can be placed. For example, Western culture has rejected the biblical metanarrative of creation, fall and redemption and has replaced it with the concept of unguided evolution, eliminating the telos which directed and motivated early Christian civilization. This leaves contemporary Western cultures adrift, having to create a telos from one's own imagination. Since telos determines goodness, there is confusion about what is good and to where human flourishing might be directed. This confusion about goodness bleeds into human relationships and opens the door for pseudo-loves to abuse instead of edify. Because one's end goal provides direction for decisions and actions, Schlabach (2001) can say, "Whether self-love is right or self-denial is properly evangelical depends in both cases on the larger good toward which they aim, and this requires a teleological framework to give them meaning" (p. 151). Benevolence requires a firm grasp of what is good which is determined by the end goal, which according to the Christian metanarrative is honoring God by becoming more like Christ to participate in the redemption of relationships.

The following example illustrates how telos determines in part the goodness of an action. If a man runs into a burning building: is it a good and wise act or a harmful and foolish one? In large part, his motivation determines the evaluation. If he desires to save the life of a child or invalid, he could be seen as loving, brave, and selfless; his action is good. If he runs in simply

because he bet a friend five dollars he could make his way through the smoky building to the other side without being burned, he is a fool and morally culpable for any injury to himself or any fireman having to go in after him. Moral reasoning is not always easy, for at times what is wrong and harmful can feel right and safe. If someone avoids confronting an alcoholic spouse out of fear that the relationship would end and one would be left alone, though it might feel safer and more prudent, it is a motivation other than the good of the spouse (or the good of the self), and therefore isn't a loving motivation.

Additionally, what appears and feels normal due to familial or wider cultural patterns might actually be deepening injury and working against the good of the lover or the beloved. This is when self-denial (as discussed in Part One) plays a foundational role in loving others well. When a disciple renounces the self-constructed identity-narrative and in its place receives a God-constructed one, the new telos motivates and models love for others with an understanding of goodness and maturity which might run counter to the prevailing cultural ethos. The biblical path of love may require forfeiting not only our our nuclear family's inculturated ways and the wider culture's, but also our own "rigid, self-protective, God-dishonoring ways of relating" (Allender & Crabb, 2018, p. 174). Allender (2018) says, "We were made to grow, to learn, to change as human beings. However, sin not only inhibits growth but makes it the exception, not the rule" (p. 173). Sin will prevent growth in benevolence through deceptive pseudo-loves and through resistance to selflessness. Therefore, the disciple who has taken on an identity in Christ and desires to love will need to grow in wisdom, so as not to be fooled by deception, and in Christlikeness, so as not to be overcome by selfishness.

Benevolence informed by wisdom has been encouraged by Christians for centuries. Bernard of Clairvaux in the Middle Ages, for example, proclaimed that "self-interest is

restrained within due bounds when love supervenes; for then it rejects evil things altogether, prefers better things to those merely good, and cares for the good only on account of the better" (Bernard, 2014, p. 41). Bernard implicitly recognizes the need for wisdom and discernment in order to love benevolently, for one will need to discern the better over the merely good in order to love well. Love will not be an undisciplined or reckless outpouring of gifts or a servile obedience to demands. Rather, loving benevolence will be a focused intention, directed by wisdom, enlightened by truth, and disciplined to maturity through self-control.

Paul's prayer for the Philippians displays this relationship between love and wisdom: "It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Philippians 1:9). It is discernment that allows one to identify abusive dynamics as well as any patterns of behaving that perpetuate those dynamics. Where a previous self-directed telos might consider maintaining a relationship despite abusive dynamics as tenable in order to keep from feeling lonely and rejected, a God-directed telos might bring courage and wisdom to change one's goal to encouraging Christlikeness in the self and others. This might mean enduring loneliness for a time. However, God does not leave his children without resources; relationships within the local body of Christ can provide the comfort, wisdom, courage, and relationships one needs to love well.

Love often desires mutual intimacy

There are different depths and types of love. Oftentimes love for another person will grow deeper than benevolence into a desire for mutual intimacy, to know another person openly and honestly while being known in the same way by them. Balswick et al. (2016) define intimacy exactly in these terms, "to know and be known" (p. 71). Human beings are made such that one's deepest fulfillment will be found in knowing God and others and being known by

them. Similarly, one's deepest sadness will come from the absence of knowing and being known. This is because "as humans we all long to be known … uncovered, affirmed and loved" (Balswick et al., 2016, p. 42); the presence or absence of love becomes our highest or lowest experiences. Intimacy with the beloved is the ultimate desire of the lover.

Intimacy, the experience of mutual relational closeness with another person, is integral to becoming a full person. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) agrees that intimacy is required in order to become a mature person when he says, "The capacity to achieve intimacy with others is a prominent part of the reflexive project of the self" (p. 96). Fromm (2013) calls the desire for "interpersonal fusion … the most powerful stirring in man[kind]. It is the most fundamental passion; it is the force which keeps the human race together" (p. 38). Aelred of Rievaulx (1163/2010) quipped, "A friendless person is like an animal" (p. 72). For a celibate medieval Catholic monk, what he called "spiritual friendship" was the most intimate relation this world could offer, and he taught his followers how to enjoy the platonic intimacy of deep friendship because he recognized the importance of intimacy. As a side note, the fact that his conception of intimacy was absent any idea of sexual interaction is a valuable lesson for today's hyper-sexual culture and emphasizes the emotional and psychological elements of human connection.

Intimacy requires self-knowledge. The "showing" half of intimacy requires a growing self-awareness. If we are to reveal ourselves to another person for intimacy, we must be able to know our inner life and have the language to describe it accurately to others. The ability to see into one's own emotions, deep-seated beliefs, and way of thinking is a crucial ability for self-denying love because "only the self-possessed, self-conscious, and self-reflexive being is able to make of himself or herself a gift to the other" (Wallenfang, 2017, p. 90).

Fromm declared that reason is "life being aware of itself" (Fromm, 2013, p. 24). Self-awareness is the "perception and construal of [one's] own moods, desires and intentions" (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 440). It includes a conscious knowledge of one's identity-narrative, an "awareness of one's interpretations of one's past and present" (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 453). Because we can suppress or deny the truth about ourselves, the Christian needs God's help in knowing the self, for "the Spirit awakens us to what lies hidden within…so God can work with our conscious consent to free us for growth" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 37). There are differing depths to which individuals are able to understand themselves; it is a "graduated variable" (Johnson, 2007, p. 439).

The psalmist demonstrates a desire for self-awareness, opening one of his psalms with an exclamation of intimate honesty: "O LORD, you have searched me and known me!" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Psalm 139:1). While the omniscient God has perfect knowledge of all things, including intimate personal knowledge of each individual, the use of the verb "to search" creates a dynamic sense of activity in the knowing. By the end of the psalm the writer cries out, asking God to evaluate his deepest parts: "Search me, O God, and know my heart!" This is more than mere knowledge; it is an invitation to evaluate and judge. The writer needs to be declared innocent in comparison to his wicked enemies (v. 19-22). The writer does not assume perfect innocence, but rather assumes there may be "grievous ways" found. The dynamic of humility and repentance desires to know God and be known by him intimately forever. God's nature invites this relational experience, for "by reflecting on how the all-powerful, transcendent God is also the intensely personal, immanent God, the psalmist opens his heart to scrutiny" (Estes, 2019, p. 605).

Repentance is a dialectical mindset in which one asks God to tear down one's previous ways of interpreting the self and the world with their attendant blind spots to God's love and mercy and our own relationally hurtful responses. Simultaneously, the repentant disciple begins to adopt God's understanding of good, evil and love. Such deep change arising out of intimate openness is made more inviting by God's mercy, goodness and love. As disciples open themselves to be measured and examined by God, they can expect to be evaluated but also forgiven, cleansed and joyfully received. In knowing and being known by God, the disciple is simultaneously being judged/forgiven, condemned/accepted, corrected/affirmed, torn down/built up. Growing in intimacy with God is a dialectical dynamic in which the deeper one process goes, the fuller the opposite process is experienced. The more deeply one is evaluated, the more fully one experiences forgiveness; the more deep the sadness from wrongdoing, the fuller the joy in being brought closer to God.

While God knows all people intimately, the psalmist's openness to God turns the knowledge and judgment of God into an intimate relational act in which the poet and God mutually engage. In this way, the psalmist moves beyond knowing about God and even beyond knowing himself; he experiences the conscious awareness of being known by God personally. In so doing he discovers more deeply who he himself is in relation to God. This may not be a common experience for the church goer, for "we tend to place a great deal of emphasis on the ways and the degree to which we *know* God (or know things *about* God) rather than to the degree we are *being known by* God" (C. Thompson, 2010, p. 16). So self-knowledge is neither self-focused nor an activity done in isolation; rather, it is done in the presence of God as a relational dynamic. C. Thompson (2010) continues,

> To be known is one of God's passions. While he desires for us to have the experience of being known by him, just as important is his desire to experience being known by us…. *He desires to be known by as much for what it does for him as for what it does for us*." (p. 23)

This is the dialectical blessing of love: the lover enjoys loving. Sacrificing for the beloved brings joy. When love is mutual, sacrificial actions open intimacy to deeper expressions and experience because "it is only through the process of being known that you come to know yourself and learn how to know others" (C. Thompson, 2010, p. 23).

As embodied human beings, listening to our physical bodies is an important element in listening to our inner selves, for "body (autonomic) awareness is an integral part of self-awareness" (Dana, 2018, p. 81). This is an interweaving of the physical and the psycho-spiritual. As an incarnated unity, the sense of who we are is not merely a cognitive or emotional task; it is also physical because "our sense of agency, how much we feel in control, is defined by our relationship with our bodies and its rhythms" (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 333). Paying attention to one's physical sensations can be a step toward unlocking one's unknown cognitive and emotional beliefs. Once revealed, motivations and other inner dynamics can be evaluated, addressed, confronted and then rejected or encouraged. Therefore, "when we notice our autonomic experience, we have the chance to engage with it, not simply be engaged by it" (Dana, 2018, p. 100). In this way, a person becomes more in charge of their attitudes and choices and less manipulated by mysterious drives. They will be able to love with better intentions and wiser choices.

Non-judgmentalism and listening in intimacy. Transparent self-examination requires a sense of identity-safety. If one believes it is "okay" to be wrong, defective or immature (in the

sense that one's identity is more than one's mistakes, wounds, sins and weaknesses – not in the sense of resigned to failure), one will be able to dig more deeply and truthfully into one's own motivations, attitudes, and actions. If a person can say, "I am precious and important even though I am imperfect and do wrong sometimes," then one has identity-safety and can boldly engage in a search for self-knowledge. In this dynamic non-judgmentalism means that one is safe from shame, condemnation and rejection even if undesirable truths about the self are discovered. This security in one's identity arises from being defined by God as already accepted, free and beloved. An anchored identity allows for deeper self-knowledge and deeper self-knowledge anchors the identity's narrative which makes for a more robust and free personal agency. This, then, allows for a bold and committed benevolent love. What Au and Au (1995) call "self-appropriation" or "knowing what's going on inside" (p. 3) is integral to loving others well.

The "knowing" half of intimacy is not a mere cognitive awareness about the individual. It requires accepting the other person without judgmentalism, just as the self can be accepted without condemnation. Non-judgmentalism creates an environment which can bring about "a concerted effort… to listen, understand and want what is best for the other. Not only are differences accepted but uniqueness is valued and respected in a way that confirms the other person" (Balswick et al., 2016, p. 72). Because intimacy is mutual, acceptance and respect of the self and the other can be experienced by both parties. The absence of these on one side of the relationship may be evidence that the dynamic of intimacy isn't mutual and might be a sign that the relationship is abusive.

Balswick et al.'s (2016) inclusion of "wanting what is best for the other" connects the benevolence element of love with the receiving element of intimacy. Receiving another person as they present themselves is a relational skill that is developed in order to grow into someone who

can be intimate with another safely. For some, the desire to judge, comment, compare, or conquer inhibits the act of receiving that is needed for loving intimacy. James Loder (1998) emphasized the lack of asserting control on the beloved when he considered love as implying "a non-possessive delight in the particularity of the other" (quoted in Balswick et al., 2016, p. 223). Non-possession and non-control are crucial attitudes for nonjudgmental listening which is at the heart of receiving a person who opens themselves to another. Controlling and judgmental attitudes are signposts of abusive dynamics and pseudo-loves.

Listening is a relational skill which is absolutely essential in connecting with other people. It is how the other is received and so it is the means through which intimacy happens and grows. Ultimately, listening – to God and to others – is openness and attention to the other person, which sets aside one's desire to speak, to prove oneself right, to supersede the opinion of the other, or to manipulate people and circumstances. In Tedeschi and Moore's (2016) workbook on post-traumatic growth, the ability to listen without judging is the first in a long list of valuable character traits in helpful companions (112). They quote a trauma survivor speaking of their companion as one who lets "me think out loud" and is "okay with me repeating myself" (Tedeschi & Moore, 2016, p. 113).

Listening is loving. Listening honors the other person. Listening is about discovering and accepting the other person unconditionally because they are a person. Listening builds connections and strengthens relationships. Listening is compassionate and builds compassion and empathy. For the Christian, listening to others is a fruit of being heard by God. God listens to us, so we listen to others. When God listens to us and we experience his presence as accepting and listening, we are transformed into people who can listen well. Those who feel heard by God are more open to hearing from God, and they are better able to truly hear others. Listening opens

the speaker and the listener to deeper intimacy. Listening requires the lover to be patient, trusting God that opportunities to correct or challenge will come later when appropriate and helpful.

Intimacy "requires that we be acknowledged and accepted for who we truly are.… Real love cannot be blind. To be loved we must be known" (DeYoung, 2014, p. 60). Because a person's inner life is "like deep water" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Proverbs 20:5), intimacy is often described with terms synonymous with depth. This concept of deepness is a geographical metaphor for the soul's hiddenness, mystery, and complexity as can be seen in this quote: "True interpersonal love rests at nothing short of the innermost depth of the person" (Wallenfang, 2017, p. 130). Fromm (2013) also uses the metaphor of depth to describe the mystery of the human soul. "The knowledge which is an aspect of love … does not stay at the periphery, but penetrates to the core" (p. 53). A rudimentary understanding of the other is not enough for intimacy; breaking through the inevitable masks and barriers to get to the foundational purposes and motivations of the other is intimacy's passion.

Intimacy necessitates revealing the self. Martin Buber (1958) makes clear that this knowing and showing is going to require honesty. He describes "genuine dialogue" as requiring "no seeming" (Buber, 1923/1958, pp. 65–68). In other words, what one presents as one's feelings, thoughts, opinions, aspirations, priorities, and attitude – as an offering for the other person to receive – must be true to what one understands of oneself. In fact, this struggle to honestly represent oneself to another, what Buber (1958) calls "the difference between being and seeming, between authenticity and lying," he also sees as "the essential problem of the interhuman" (p.65). It is a problem because it is difficult and risky; it is difficult to know what we truly are, and it's risky to then expose that to another. Therefore, there is an "inner resistance to being illuminated"(Buber, 1966, p. 128). This has been true since the Fall (Genesis 3), when

the first human beings hid from God after they sinned and then blamed others in an attempt to avoid guilt in the midst of their shame. When God enters the garden and asks Adam, "Where are you?" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Gen. 3:9) he is inviting the man to step out, to expose the true inner self, and to seek mercy. Buber calls this type of event the "crucial hour" when a person is confronted with their guilt before another person and stands momentarily at a crossroads, deciding whether to look deeply within and accept the reality of the betraying self and opening that truth to another person, or to suppress the truth and present a whitewashed artificial self to the other.

Centuries before Buber, Aelred (1163/2010) described the showing element of intimacy: "Between us there was nothing counterfeit, nothing masked … no side-stepping, no hiding places, but all was open and honest" (p. 125). *Honesty* is important for the showing side of intimacy; *grace* is crucial for the knowing, or receiving side. This grace can be seen as hospitality for the soul, accepting the other for how they are and who they are without judgment or rejection. Aelred metaphorically described this knowing and receiving of the other: "He personally began to love me more closely than before … and to pour himself into my heart" (p. 123). Buber (1966) also recognizes the receiving of one another in intimacy, describing the relationship as one in which "each one makes present the other in his own being" (p. 67).

An honest look into the self and an honest presentation of that self can be psychologically and emotionally intense. So can receiving an honest presentation of another person. Wallenfang (2017) found in Edith Stein's theological anthropology "spiritual openness … [as] the key term signaling intersubjective union of persons in love" (p. 19). This spiritual openness is a willingness to reveal the self to another person; it creates a feeling of being exposed. If the relationship is safe – with no judgment or rejection – the exposure does not involve shame or

abusive dynamics because "in the reciprocating relationship there is give and take, and take and give. A high view of both the self and the other is required to value the giving and receiving" (Balswick et al., 2016, p. 42). When there is a "high view of both the self and the other," then there will not be abusive dynamics. But not all relationships are safe and so giving of the self involves great risk.

It is not always wise to be open to intimacy in certain relationships. Aelred (1163/2010) warns his disciples that "not everyone we love should be welcomed into friendship, because not all are suitable" (p. 89). Aelred's practical wisdom recognizes the reality that some people are not safe; those who open themselves to unsafe others will be rejected, scorned, taken advantage of, or otherwise injured. Jesus commands us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44, for example), but he would not command us to be intimate with them. It is said early in his ministry that even Jesus held back from a certain depth of intimacy with other people. "Many believed in his name…But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, John 2:23-24). After years of training his disciples, however, the relationships were different and Jesus allowed the disciples to see him more intimately. This intimacy especially concerned revealing and knowing his identity, especially his role as Messiah and his goal of redeeming the entire world. In the upper room before his death he said, "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, John 15:15).

While loving benevolence might be shown to all, intimacy should not be shared with all. A disciple of Jesus can love an enemy without opening the relationship to abusive patterns.

Recognizing this distinction between loving others and being intimately open to them is crucial in order to prevent dehumanizing relationship dynamics. Benevolent goodwill and the desire for intimacy do not necessarily dictate that intimacy is offered when it is unsafe to do in the current situation. If a relationship currently does not allow for safe knowing and being known, a Christian can still desire, pray, and work toward the time when it might be possible, all the while continuing to do good for the other wisely. This may be in part what Paul means when he says that "love hopes all things" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, 1 Corinthians 13:7). Desiring the good of our enemies means hoping for repentance, salvation, and restoration which will ultimately make reconciliation and intimacy possible. Volf (2019) engages love, benevolence and wisdom altogether when he says, "Yes, we must hope. But in the meantime…" (p. 218). Realism and optimism exist together in the wise and loving.

Knowing that we were once enemies of God and of others and are being transformed by the Spirit into Christlikeness for the glory of the Father, we can hope that the same experience will befall those who have hurt us in the past. We might see in our own "status as reconciled former enemies of God the motivation to treat [our] own enemies as God has treated [us], both by forgiving and refusing to slay, thus keeping open prospects for a fuller reconciliation" (Schlabach, 2001, p. 131). Love, Schlabach (2001) says here, hopes for a change in the people and the relationship that will someday allow for wise, good, and delightful intimacy. And the benevolent works of love maintain this hope as their goal. Until then, we seek to wisely discern how deep intimacy ought to delve, looking for opportunities to give mercy when wrongdoing and hurtful actions are repentantly confessed. Allender (2018), in advising those who have suffered abuse, uses cancer to represent the sin in the abuser that must be removed for their good to be realized. He says "it is not contradictory to love someone, desire their good, and equally

work toward destroying their cancer through bringing them to repentance and faith" (Allender & Crabb, 2018, p. 219).

Love's R-E-D characteristics prevent abusive dynamics

Like personhood development, the relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of love keeps it from becoming abusive. Since the goal of this dissertation is to make a case for sacrificial love being possible without being dehumanizing, up to this point I have mostly limited my discussion to love between human beings. However, from the Christian perspective we cannot properly understand love outside the context of God's love for us. This is an additional way in which love is relational for it is God's love toward the disciple that makes it possible for the disciple to love others. God's love transforms the disciple at his or her core, the identity. From a God-given significance and sense of telos, the indwelling Holy Spirit grows love for others. This foundational transformation occurs through self-denial before God which ultimately brings personal fulfillment and satisfaction, as Augustine described in his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you" (Bk. 1.1). When the disciple finds rest in God, it becomes a stabilizing and strengthening force within the personality so that loving others, even when not loved in return, is made possible.

So love is a dynamic between two people and the Divine. When relationships are loving, personhood development flourishes. For example, it is through the unconditional love of parents that "children acquire a reciprocating self that is secure, knowing that physical and emotional needs will be addressed" (Balswick et al., 2016, p. 173). In this way love is relational, and relationality flourishes when love is present. Loving others biblically will not perpetuate abusive relationships. Abuse is the antithesis of the benevolence at the root of love. Love will boldly confront abusive dynamics and work against them because "bold love is a commitment to do

whatever it takes (apart from sin) to bring health (salvation) to the abuser" (Allender & Crabb, 2018, p. 218).

Love is embodied. Benevolence is often carried out physically by the lover's body for the good of the beloved's body. Moses and Jesus envisioned love for God anas involving one's heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37). The inclusion of strength in the biblical list is evidence of the embodiedness of love. Love can be physically expressed through presence, touch, care for the body of the beloved, and material gifts and provisions. Love's embodiedness means that the intensity of the risk in intimacy can be expressed in physiological reactions such as sweating, shaking, increased heart rate, shallow breathing, and unease in the gut (Dana, 2018, pp. 19–20; Herman, 1992, pp. 35–36, 160). In a safe relationship, the physiological response to the delights of intimacy can be pleasure, warmth, a sense of serenity, and joy.

Any physiological sense of fulfillment and satisfaction arising out of the experience of loving and being loved is due to the reality that we are physiologically and psychologically created for loving intimacy with God and others. When this telos is realized, even in part, our bodies experience feelings of safety and peace. Cozolino (2008) explains the neuroscience involved in the interplay between personal growth and loving relationships: "Through love we regulate each other's brain chemistry, sense of well-being, and immunological functioning. And when the drive to love is thwarted – when we are frightened, abused, or neglected – our mental health is compromised" (quoted in Cavaleri, 2014, pp. 161–162). The embodiedness of loving means there may be physiological evidence of being loved, and of not being loved. These physical signs can be pointers to expose pseudo-loves which generate abusive dynamics. Whether the one suffering recognizes the signs or a trusted confidant identifies them, the physical effects of fear, anxiety, or depression can be evidence of abusive dynamics even if the

abuse is itself not physical. While human loving relationships are not perfect, in general, the sign of being loved well is "mental health" and a "sense of well-being," according to Cozolino (2008), and this health is experienced physically as much as mentally and emotionally.

The embodiedness of personhood and of love points to an additional caution against abusive dynamics. Human beings are physically limited. The biophysical base for psychological and emotional experiences points to the reality of limitations in these areas, too. One's attention to health, nutrition, sleep, exercise, and other factors can weaken or strengthen the ability for benevolence and sacrificial giving. One can work toward realistic expectations for benevolence and intimacy, even if they are unrequited.

In addition to limitations, our embodied creatureliness also means that we have physical and emotional needs that must be filled in order to devote the outward energy required for benevolent love. It is not wrong, sinful, or self-centered to devote oneself to self-care, for "every living thing has boundaries, giving it definition. Indeed, nothing can live a life of integrity or purpose without its own given form" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 69). Thompson is speaking specifically in the context of taking rest. Note that she emphasizes the accomplishment of one's purpose as the reason to live within one's creaturely boundaries. In order to achieve the purpose of loving God and others, the Christian has to wisely and humbly prioritize limited personal resources. Some abusive relational dynamics can be identified by the manner in which one person ignores the natural and good limitations of the self or the other. It is right, just, and loving to work against such dynamics.

Peter Scazzero (2010) also recognizes the importance of living within one's human boundaries. "Emotionally healthy people," he says, "understand the limits God has given them…. Understanding and respecting our boundaries and limits is one of the most important

character qualities and skills leaders need in order to be long-term lovers of God and others" (Scazzero & Bird, 2010, pp. 137, 141). Scazzero makes an important connection between loving, endurance, and recognizing one's human limits. Loving others is dialectically encouraging and provides the lover with joy and personal growth, but serving and sacrificing for others requires emotional and physical energy which - even for the Spirit-filled believer - is not in endless supply. Embodiedness means every person has physical and emotional limits. This must be remembered in our dynamics with others so that relationships do not become abusive by ignoring or bypassing proper boundaries for both the lover and the beloved.

The dialectical nature of love is evidenced in the manner in which the act of loving inherently gives the giver deep good in return. This goes beyond the experience of mutual love involving the giving to and receiving from one another; even if the beloved does not or cannot return the love, the lover is still built up by the act of loving the other.

The dialectical nature of love is also seen in the intimacy arising from it. Love often involves a desire both to know and to be known. Love hopes that the revealing and accepting will be mutual, for "love is never a detached act, a [mere] rational calculation of what will promote the good of the other" (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 192). Knowing is dialectically connected to showing; the depth of one is interdependent on the depth of the other. Deep intimacy requires both persons to show and to know, that is, to give and receive, each other. Pia Mellody and her co-authors (1989) describe intimacy as "an exchange. One person is giving and the other is receiving. Sometimes both occur at once" (p. 55). But ultimately neither giving nor receiving can truly happen apart from the "opposing" dynamic.

Contrary to this concept, some consider *agape* to be the highest form of love, sacrificial, and never seeking mutuality because it is completely selfless. It is common to find authors

assuming distinct differences between the four Greek words for love: *agape*, *eros*, *sturges* and *phileo*. Specifically for our current discussion, *agape* is compared to the others and explained as spiritual and completely selfless while *eros* is seen as earthly, sensual and physical. For example, Stauffer (1985) claims that "the church … practices a love that does not desire but gives" (p. 10). Reinhold Niebuhr says, "Love is purest where it desires no returns for itself" (quoted in Schlabach, 2001, p. 16). Hall & Hall (2021) note that popular church teaching often results "in a view of *agape* as a special kind of divine love, clearly differentiated from other kinds of more 'human' love by its sacrificial nature … suggest[ing] that *agape* is not a mutual kind of love" (Hall and Hall, 2021, p. 188). In response to this common understanding they take note that the love of God found between the three Persons of the Trinity, *agape*, "is essentially reciprocal" (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 188). Hall & Hall (2021) believe that "conceptualizing agape as always nonmutual… becomes problematic" when looking at its varied uses in the New Testament (p. 188).

Schlabach (2001), too, believes Augustine's concept of *caritas* (in Latin) brings agape and eros together in such a way that there exists in God a desire for mutual enjoyment (pp. 5-7). I agree with Schlabach (2001) and Hall & Hall (2021), holding that divine love desires a reciprocal and mutually delightful intimacy. God makes himself known as an invitation for human beings to make themselves known to God in return. He desires his revelation of himself to be openly welcomed and received, to be cherished and celebrated. That is, "God's love is intended to be mutual; it aims at that mutuality" (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 186). Our own human experience reveals unrequited love is disappointing for "it is the responsive component of love that is satisfying for us" (Laing, 2022, p. 415). When the revelation of the self is met by open

receptivity and reciprocal revelation by the beloved, love experiences its goal and is delighted. This is a dialectical interaction.

There are some instances when commonly understood expressions of love cannot be symmetrical – caring for a parent who is far along the path of dementia, for example, or caring for a child with severe developmental disabilities. While these relationships can still involve a deep level of satisfaction due to the dialectical nature of love that receives as it gives, there still might remain a desire for a fuller mutuality that was either once but no longer present or will never be experienced until the time when all is restored. The asymmetricality of giving and receiving in these relationships can be exhausting, and the caregiver can rightly remain aware of their own limited resources and their own creaturely needs. Yet this does not disprove the dialectical nature of loving which receives by the very act of giving. I discuss asymmetrical love dynamics more fully in the next chapter.

Inherent in the giving of the self is the reception of other blessings. Herman (1992) found this to be true in working with support groups for women who were recovering from trauma. She found that, “as each participant extends herself to others, she becomes more capable of receiving the gift that others have to offer” (Herman, 1992, p. 215). Giving of the self, whether mutual or not, changes the giver in a positive way. Those who give of themselves, who risk opening their inner life for others to see and accept as they are, gain an increased ability to empathize, to connect, to receive from others, to honor others, to boldly take risks, and to trust. Skills for intimate community are gained. Even if the openness is not reciprocated by the other person, the giver becomes a better person, more mature and more capable of interpersonal connection by the act of offering the self to be received by another. So for relationships in which mutuality is not possible, lovers still experience a dialectical dynamic within the self; in giving they receive a

good thing. For the Christian, this receiving through the act of giving goes even deeper, beyond the natural dynamic in human development and relationships. As an ever-present third Person in the loving relationship, God can pour grace and strength and spiritual flourishing into the one who is giving the self.

The dialectical nature of love can serve as a safeguard against abusive dynamics from those who refuse to reciprocate. If one's efforts at intimacy and self-giving are rejected or met with injury, the Christian can take note of Jesus's example discussed above and not trust themselves to people who are currently responding in abusive ways . The disciple may continue to love someone who is acting in abusive ways, but the benevolence might focus more on discerning and speaking truth about the disciple's needs for safe mutuality and the beloved's need for repentance and transformation. Opening the self for intimate connection to certain degrees may need to wait until the relationship shows safer dynamics and openness to mutuality. Remembering love's relational, embodied, and dialectical nature may help the Christian to discern false loves that fail to address or display these characteristics.

I have discussed love for the purposes of this dissertation as a benevolent giving of the self. To address the specific matter of abusive dynamics I need now to recognize that there are times when love will require sacrificing something good for oneself in order to accomplish a certain good for another. And sometimes the sacrificial nature of love will be asymmetrical, so that one person sacrifices more often or more deeply than the other. Understanding the nature of love has laid the foundation to discuss how asymmetrical sacrificial love is possible without perpetuating abusive dynamics. In the next chapter I will demonstrate how sacrificial love is the means through which God brings communal flourishing and redemptive goodness into the world. When one's identity is anchored in Christ through self-denial, so are one's dignity, value, and

freedom. The God-received identity-narrative establishes sacrificial love as the means by which the disciple's telos is accomplished. The new identity-narrative will make the proper connections between the love for self, love for God, and love for others. This is the context that will keep any relationships involving asymmetrical sacrifice from perpetuating abusive dynamics.

Chapter Four: Sacrificial love that does not dehumanize

Chapter Three spoke of love in a general way, explaining how its R-E-D nature keeps the benevolence of love from perpetuating abusive dynamics. In this chapter I look at sacrificial love in particular, which is especially ripe to be taken advantage of in such a manner that dehumanizing abuse can occur. I explain how the identity-forming dynamic of self-denial before God places sacrificial love as the telos of an identity anchored in the Christ narrative, a narrative which also establishes the value, dignity, and freedom of the individual-in-community. For this reason, sacrificial love can be a fulfilling and honoring experience for the one who loves in this way. Sacrificial love is a love in which the lover places a certain good for others higher than a certain good for the self. Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux shed light on the relationship between the sometimes competing goods involved in loving the self, God and others, showing that it is not a case of balancing competing needs, but a case of these three loves being mutually interdependent. I will make the case that because of the R-E-D nature of sacrificial love, rather than being a source of abusive dynamics, it is the means through which God brings flourishing to communities and fulfillment to individuals in those communities, even if the sacrifice within the relationship is asymmetrical.

The danger of sacrificial love

There are contexts in which sacrificial love can be present asymmetrically, that is, relationships in which one person sacrifices more than the other. This can be abusive, but it is not necessarily so. Parenthood, for example, is a situation in which the parent, because of love, consistently sacrifices personal needs and resources for the good of the child. Throughout the years the child is generally unaware of the nature of the sacrifices made, sometimes grateful and other times ungrateful and rebellious. Rarely is the asymmetry of this situation considered to be

abusive. It is natural and, due to the dialectical nature of love, fulfilling for the parent. In healthy cases, the child grows to understand and appreciate the deep and sacrificial nature of the parent's love, expresses gratitude for it, and even seeks to imitate it for their children. In another example, Balswick et al. (2005) recognize that asymmetry in ministerial settings also may not necessarily be unhealthy:

> While ministry is to be reciprocal, it need not be a symmetrical exchange. This gets at our earlier point about a covenant relationship with God and each other. *Mutuality* does not quite convey the idea since *mutuality* so strongly suggests equal and identical give-and-take. In relationships the give-and-take (reciprocity) may not be equal…. This lack of symmetry is, however, no defect or detriment to a covenantal relationship – it may in fact be its essence. (pp.347-348, italics orig.)

This quote implies the obligations within covenants and is comfortable with asymmetrical reciprocity in some relationships. However, asymmetry may be wearying and difficult and will require considered attention to the creaturely needs and limitations of the one who sacrificially loves. Even so, these are not necessarily abusive situations.

Yet if ignorance of the sacrifices made, ingratitude, resistance, and rebellion are evidenced in a relationship where something closer to symmetry is expected, such as with a married couple or a close friendship, the asymmetry of the sacrificial giving might rightly be considered unhealthy. Differing relationships bring different expectations; there is a wide spectrum of loving relationships, with a range of expression and obligation depending on the roles and needs of those in the relationship. Relationships in which the participants are expected to honor, appreciate and in some ways return each other's sacrificial living, yet generally do not do so, generate concern for the idea of sacrificial love.

Gill-Austern (1996) believes that sacrificing for other people in the name of Christian love too easily perpetuates abuse. And because that abuse more often arises from men against women, this becomes for her a women's safety issue: "The equation of love with self-sacrifice, self-denial, and self-abnegation in Christian theology is dangerous to women's psychological, spiritual, and physical health, and it is contrary to the real aim of Christian love" (p. 304). Gill-Austern (1996) recognizes that there is a noble goal for love in Christian theology and ethics, but in her view if love is characterized by self-sacrifice or self-denial, then the goal is not reached because self-sacrifice and self-denial involve a weakening or dismissing of the personhood of the one loving. She finds the concept of sacrifice practically irredeemable and chooses to redefine love to exclude it in most cases and allow for it only temporarily in other cases. She says, "Not self-sacrificing but … mutual self-giving and receiving are at the heart of divine love.… Such love may require self-sacrifice as a step on the journey to mutual love, but never as its ultimate aim" (p. 320). Here Gill-Austern (1996) is rightly noting that God's love motivates a desire for intimacy with his human creation; this mirrors the intimacy within the Trinity (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, John 14:20-21; 17:21). If sacrifice will bring about love's desire for intimacy, then love will joyfully sacrifice. Practically speaking, the nature of humanity will most likely mean sacrifice of some kind is in order in most loving relationships. Therefore, Christian love is more often sacrificial than not, whether or not mutuality or intimacy is present.

Gill-Austern (1996) is not the only writer recognizing the dangers of a love that is self-sacrificing. Schlabach (2001) similarly seems to treat self-denial and self-sacrifice as necessary evils when he comments that "self-denial is not a good in itself and self-sacrifice is not a freestanding duty" (p. 17). There appears to be a fear that self-denial and self-sacrifice will become something destructive, that the concepts themselves are to be handled with great caution

and perhaps avoided if possible. This shrinking back does not seem due to the pain involved in the process of denial and sacrifice; neither Gill-Austern nor Schlabach raise comfort, safety or ease above Christian duty. Rather they seem to find an ultimately damaging element in the concept of self-denial and sacrificial love, especially in cases where they are absolutized by being viewed as ends in themselves.

Schlabach (2001) attempts to define self-denial in a positive way, as "preferring God's will over one's own will" (p. 80). In another place, he describes self-denial as breaking, shattering, or in biblical terms "crucifying" the "state of preoccupation" and "self-centeredness" (p. 13). These descriptions of self-denial are not too different from the definition I used in Chapter Two, that it involves renouncing one's authority to define oneself and dialectically receiving God's narrative about the self in its place. Gill-Austern (1996) and Schlabach (2001) both find a danger of dehumanization and abuse lurking within the interpersonal dynamics involved with sacrificial love. Recognizing these concerns, I first make a clear distinction between self-denial and sacrificial love and then define both within their biblical contexts.

Self-denial is a dynamic between disciples and God in which they renounce themselves-as-authority and receive God as that authority. God defines his disciples' identities by offering a new narrative to express their significance and purpose and to provide a new telos. Distinct from self-denial before God, sacrificial love between human beings is a dynamic in which disciples choose – from an anchored place of significance and purpose in Christ – to prioritize a certain good of the other over their own good. I will show that the R-E-D characteristics of love and the place of love of self among love of God, and love of neighbor work alongside the disciple's anchored place in Christ to prevent this sacrifice from becoming abusive.

Laporte (1997) considers self-denial "a surrender of our prerogatives, real and imaginary" (p. 229). Referencing the Apostle Paul, he considers "imaginary" as referring to letting go of false prerogatives and entitlements arising out of the pre-converted life, while the "real" refers to the self-divestment of genuine prerogatives and entitlements that come with being in Christ (p. 239). This approaches the definition I offer for sacrificial love: the prioritizing of a certain good for others over a certain good for the self. The use of the qualifier "certain" is meant to recognize that sacrificial love is not an utter rejection of all that is good for the one who loves. As seen in the preceding chapter, loving others does not mean the self is devalued, only that the new self in Christ desires to give good things to others. The significance and purpose of each person arising out of the disciple's identity in Christ remains.

In support of this reasoning, Laporte (1997) can keep self-denial from perpetuating abuse by separating two different meanings of "self" in a similar way that William James (1890) did as demonstrated in Chapter One. Laporte (1997) says that in self-denial, "One divests oneself of the self as *object*: the self as *subject*, which does the divesting remains intact, indeed is enhanced by the gift of itself" (p. 239 italics orig.). For Laporte, if the self as a subject remains throughout the act of self-denial, then self-denial does not have to mean the lessening of the psychological, emotional, and relational elements that make up a strong, healthy personhood; and the person who is loving sacrificially need not lose their dignity or value as a human being within the relationship.

Healthy sacrificial love is anchored in a Christ-identity

In light of the concerns over sacrificial love perpetuating abusive relational patterns, I will establish that, for the Christian, sacrificial love derives from an identity firmly established in the Christ narrative which inherently works against abusive dynamics. Sacrificial love as a

character trait forms in an individual through being loved sacrificially by caregivers and others. Experiencing the sacrificial love of others can create a readiness to believe the story of God's sacrificial love and with it a proper sense of the self as beloved. I will explain this relationship between proper self-love and sacrificial love for God and others, and finally briefly explain how asymmetrical sacrifice can be maintained without abuse occurring.

It is appropriate for the Christian believer to look to the Christian scriptures regarding this topic because "identity formation is actually a fundamental theme in the bible" (Rosner & Trueman, 2022, p. 61). Throughout scripture, believers are encouraged to form their identity primarily within the context of being in Christ. This will specifically mean adopting the metanarrative of scripture as one's personal context, for "Christians learn how to enter into Christ's dramatic activity on their behalf, renarrating themselves accordingly and grounding their new identity on the 'above things' (Col 3:1-4), more and more deeply, but in light of one's cultural and family context and personal calling" (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 137). Here Johnson does several things important to the immediate discussion: he imbeds one's identity in a narrative; he claims one's narrative can be re-written (or at least reinterpreted); he explains that being in Christ activates this process; and he realizes that this identity-in-Christ does not eliminate or change the historical particulars of an individual's unique life contexts.

I showed in Chapter Two that Jesus's invitation to self-denial before God can be seen as this re-narration of identity. Self-denial means the replacing of the self as the center of life interpretation and accepting God's interpretation of the self in relation to all things as authoritative. This requires repentance and faith and is a continuous process through one's walk with Christ. While Jesus describes this as "denying one's self," Paul describes it as putting off "the old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful

desires" (Ephesians 4:22). When disciples receive the Christ narrative as true, authoritative and applicable to the self, they also renounce their previously held self-made identity narratives. The scriptural saga is more than a story explaining what happened in the past; it is given as a narrative in which believers understand themselves to be a part. From its ancient history to its prophesied future, "the whole storyline of the Bible is set up in a way that describes, critiques, and replaces the self-made self" (Rosner & Trueman, 2022, p. 61).

This is an act of replacement, not abnegation. It sets the self on a course toward flourishing and fulfillment as God intended from the beginning. As E. L. Johnson (2017) claims, "Christ's story is the Christian's focal narrative for realizing the trinitarian goal of becoming better developed, vigorous, and virtuous personal agents in communion with God and others" (p. 145-146). He also recognizes that entering the narrative of Christ entails joining the story of the church (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 146). Johnson's full-orbed understanding of what happens when a disciple takes his place within the Christ narrative reflects the relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of developing personhood established in this dissertation.

Underneath this discussion of re-interpreting one's identity by accepting a new one from God is the presupposition that one receives instead of creates one's identity. Trueman (2020) discusses the difference between a poietic and mimetic view of the world's meaning and order (p. 39). The mimetic view "regards the world as having a given order and a given meaning and thus sees human beings as required to discover… and conform themselves to it" (Trueman, 2020, p. 39). The poietic view considers the world to have no inherent meaning; therefore, individuals can create their own meaning from it. This dissertation presumes a mimetic view of reality, that the meaning and order within creation are assigned to it by the Creator; all things were made by

him and for him. The meaning of creation is understood by telling the true narrative about it and its history.

Especially crucial to understanding the meaning of a narrative are the beginning and the end of the story. Therefore, “as society moves from a view of the world as possessing intrinsic meaning, so it also moves away from a view of humanity as having a specific, given end” (Trueman, 2020, p. 39). And this is where many contemporary people find themselves, for “out of the more than a score of great civilizations in human history, modern Western civilization is the very first to have no agreed-upon answer to the question of the purpose of life” (Guinness, 2003, p. 7)

However, receiving God’s narrative interpretation of one’s place in the world includes receiving the purpose and significance which arise from that narrative. This is key for Christian personhood development for “purpose and fulfillment is one of the deepest issues in our modern world” (Guinness, 2003, p. 2). The Christ narrative begins in prehistory with the Creation of all things as related in the first chapter of Genesis and continues through to the end of the final age in the twenty-second chapter of the book of Revelation. This narrative tells of the perfection of original creation, the fall of humankind, and God’s purpose to redeem everything back to its original state of glory and of open relationship with him. Disciples recognize that they exist within the flow of biblical history and that their purpose arises out of God’s actions to return the fullness of the image of God to humankind. In this narrative, God’s children are invited to participate in the redemption of all creation through becoming like Christ through the fruit of the indwelling Spirit. Jesus becomes their model and their motivation to bring justice, beauty, and goodness into the world; and the Holy Spirit, the indwelling Counselor who comes alongside them becomes power, comfort, and encouragement. The narrative explains the relationship

between the believer and God so that the believer can understand how to experience and live within that relationship.

Receiving adoption into God's family and his redemptive purposes brings an experienced sense of value, dignity, and freedom to the disciple because each Christian seeks to glorify "the triune God by thinking, and feeling truly and deeply; becoming more self-aware; planning, deliberating, and acting decisively with appropriate willpower, earnestness and perseverance" (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 69). Disciples are freed from the slavery of sin and its distorted self-centered way of interpreting the world. Disciples recognize that "the great Creator alone knows our reason for being and calls us into a life of purpose" (Guinness, 2003, p. 8). Receiving this narrative as one's own requires dialectically renouncing one's previous interpretations of the self, that is, rejecting one's former identity-narratives and sense-making attempts. Renunciation and reception are interdependent within a dialectical dynamic because "escape from a false sense of life purpose is only liberating if it leads to a true one" (Guinness, 2003, p. 14).

How one interprets the facts, circumstances, and contexts of one's life determines to a large degree one's satisfaction and flourishing in life. Solzhenitsyn (n.d) recognized that "many lives have a mystical sense but not everyone reads it aright.… When we fail to decipher it, we despair because our lives seem meaningless.... The secret of a great life is … deciphering the mysterious symbols" (quoted in Guinness, 2003, p. 62). The "reading" of one's own life is held as an identity-narrative. Outside of a grander narrative in which to place one's own narrative, life seems small and insignificant. And yet God desires us to flourish in every human way. He accomplishes this by offering us a true understanding and experience of himself and the rest of creation; "God desires our proper flourishing precisely because God has chosen in this universe

to join his glory to proper human flourishing.… [He] desires to bring us into his glory, love and happiness" (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 45).

For the Christian, one's life fits into a saga that encompasses all of history. And the significance and purpose which the saga presents to disciples involves sacrificial love. Because Jesus of Nazareth loved sacrificially, Christians – or "little Christs" – are motivated to see Jesus as a model for their own attitudes and choices. Just as Jesus's sacrificial love brought redemption to creation, so disciples understand their own sacrificial love to be mirroring his by helping to bring about his redemption and flourishing of relationships and communities through their sacrificially loving actions. In this way, "humans have a central role to play in God's agenda to manifest his glory/beauty/love/happiness in this universe" (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 157). For these reasons, sacrificial loving dialectically becomes a fulfilling experience for the disciple. Knowing that one is becoming like God in one's ability to express benevolence despite personal loss encourages psychological and emotional well-being as well as spiritual maturity. Sacrificial love is God's means to bring justice and goodness into the world, as well as to judge and remove abusive dynamics.

Sacrificial love means giving up certain goods for another's good

Sacrificial love is choosing to forfeit a certain good for oneself in order that another person might have a certain good. Love involves desires and sometimes when a person loves self, God and others biblically those desires cannot all be met. When an abusive partner claims to love another and yet emphasizes his own desires over the desires of others, that is not love but manipulation. In this case, the problem is not that sacrificial love is asymmetrical but that the abuser is lying about the nature of love. When someone loves another who does not love them back, as when Jesus calls his followers to love their enemies, love's desires are different from

those in more symmetrical relationships. This kind of love for enemies opens the door to flourishing by inviting repentance, reconciliation, and the return of justice and goodness through the offering of mercy, the speaking of truth, and the experience of longsuffering.

One of the differences between sacrificing in healthy relationships and in abusive relationships may be the type of sacrifices made. Healthy disciples will not sacrifice their significance, dignity, or purpose because these come from God and are not theirs to sacrifice. Rather, they may have to sacrifice desired intimacy or short-term goals, for example, in order to encourage repentance in the offending party. It would not be considered abusive if the sacrifices made by the lover are not returned, as long as the sacrifices arise from the lover's identity anchored in Christ, driven by the love of God first experienced by the lover.

Beyond desires, love also entails obligations. God, the perfect exemplar of love, expresses his love by making covenants which bring self-imposed obligations; occasionally they come alongside expectations for the other party in the covenant. God expends energy for the good of those he loves. He encourages us to expect this from him and rely on him to accomplish what he says he will do, which is the nature of faith. Bernard of Clairvaux (1128?/2014) states that we have an obligation to love God because of who he is: "We see plainly that God is to be loved, and that he has a just claim on our love" (p. 15). Jesus placed responsibilities on every disciple who claimed to love him when he said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). So a loving relationship entails both desires and responsibilities for the lover and the beloved. Sacrificial love can be said to prioritize certain responsibilities to the other above certain responsibilities to one's own good. In relationships with other people, one's love-obligations to Jesus and to the self inform what sacrificial love for others will look like. The parameters on the sacrifice is not a balancing act (between self-care and sacrificial

love) but involves keeping the definition of goodness, wisdom and love and staying true to love's R-E-D nature.

Bernard (1128?/2014) saw love for one another as devotion, with passionate motivation and commitment to the beloved's good. He said, "love is a good and pleasant law.... Love is never without desire.… So love perfects the law of service by infusing devotion" (p. 40). Sacrifice in loving relationships is not begrudgingly performed; devotion brings a desire to do good that makes sacrificing delightful and satisfying. Aelred of Rievaulx (1163/2010), agreeing with the "philosophers of this world" who considered friendship to be a virtue and not an accident, saw it as a "covenant of sweetest love" (p. 59). Virtue and covenants have expectations and responsibilities, but when involving love these are not a burden or a law in the sense of forcing certain behaviors. Lovers resist internal and external forces which might lead them to be unfaithful or neglectful of the beloved because they are motivated by their identity in Christ, and are being transformed through being loved by God who also places obligations on himself in covenants.

At times a person has responsibilities within multiple love relationships which compete with each other for the person's limited resources. When this occurs, the person must prioritize those responsibilities. This is seen in the Lukan passage (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Luke 14:26-33) which was looked at in Chapter Two. In this pericope Jesus explains that discipleship will require "hating one's father and mother." Augustine understands Jesus's use of "hatred" language as a hyperbole to refer to rightly prioritizing competing love responsibilities. As he applies this verse to a young neophyte named Laetus in Letter 243, he explains, "If you have a well-ordered love, you should know how to prefer more important to less important things" (Augustine, 1990, p. 170). Here, one's love of Christ and its attendant responsibilities are

superior to the familial obligations. Leon Morris (1988), too, explains the comparative nature of the metaphorical use of "hatred" by saying that discipleship is making Jesus one's "first priority" in comparison to earthly loves (p. 258). Walter Liefeld (1984) also understands hate as "not an absolute but a relative term" (in Gaebelein, 1984, p. 979).

When a believer chooses to serve Christ, and that service requires not meeting one's other licit but lesser responsibilities, it might feel like hate to those not prioritized. Ironically, in choosing Christ over family, the disciple is blessing the family by showing the greatness of God in such a decision. Yet, prioritizing love for Christ does not eliminate the love-obligations for family. Augustine recognized this in his counsel to Laetus. Even as he encouraged him to remain faithful to the ministry, Augustine said that such prioritization need not be, "of course, to the extent that anyone should be ungrateful to his parents … since by them he was brought forth into this life and cherished and fed. A man should always pay his filial duty, but let these things keep their place where higher duties do not call" (Letter 243, n.d., para. 7). Prioritizing one love's obligation over another's does not eliminate those latter obligations, for "family 'honor' (pietas) remains intact as long as family members respect the primacy of God's love" (Jacobs, 2003, p. 270).

Spencer (2019) sees Jesus's words here more as a paradox than a hyperbole. Jesus continues in Luke 14:26 to include hating one's own *psyche* which is translated in the KJV, NAB, NIV and ESV as "one's own life," an all-encompassing term for one's inner and outer experiences. Spencer (2019) recognizes that "self-hate carries its own corrosive psychological baggage" (p.376) and makes clear that it is not self-hatred that Jesus is referring to, but a renouncing of "self-serving egoistic and nepotistic attachments" (p. 377). For Spencer (2019) the paradox lies in the fact that "we find/love *ourselves* only when we lose/hate *self*" (377, emph.

orig.). Putting Jesus above all other loves includes the love of self and self-preservation; this may be the very heart of self-denial. And the self-denial of discipleship guides the believer into sacrificial love of others, a similar dynamic of prioritizing others' good above one's own.

Love of self in sacrificial love for others

Using the term "prioritization of loves" alongside the ideas of prioritizing another's good over one's own implies there is a proper love of self which can be prioritized or deprioritized. Forgetting this love of self can lead to abusive dynamics. Elizabeth Johnson (2017) is concerned that "agapaic or self-giving love, without equal regard for self-affirmation and the excellence of mutuality, has operated … to maintain women's submission" (p. 279). As long as "equal regard" does not refer to a balance between self-giving and self-affirmation but rather to a dialectical interdependence, I agree that sacrificial love without regard to its relational, embodied, and dialectical nature can quickly become abusive to the lover. The concern is especially grave when self-sacrifice is not reciprocated.

Linde Getahun (2011) is similarly concerned with abusive relational dynamics arising out of the application of "hating one's life," "self-denial," and sacrificial love. She warns:

> the language of 'dying to self' has too often fostered falsely negative perceptions of the self and excessive passivity in responding to one's responsibilities…. What is rightly emphasized is the rejection of self-*ishness*, of that fixation upon and preoccupation with one's own interests to the disregard of others and the claims of the Creator. (p. 742).

Her terms "fixation" and "preoccupation" are terms which imply over-prioritizing one issue in a multifaceted relationship, in this case giving the self more attention than it deserves to the detriment of other relational obligations. Both E. L. Johnson (2017) and

Getahun (2011) recognize some sort of obligation to the self, arising out of a love for self, within a proper Christian life.

E. L. Johnson (2007) discusses self-love briefly in his chapter on "Outwardness: The Manifestation of Christlikeness" (pp. 539-566). From his perspective, the love of self "can only properly be understood within the three personal dimensions of human life (God-others-self), and in terms of the redemptive-historical metanarrative (creation, Fall, and redemption)" (p. 559). I have shown earlier in this chapter how the metanarrative of scripture forms the identity of the believer and motivates them toward sacrificial love. It also redeems self-love through the dignity and value it places on all individuals, including the disciple seeking to love sacrificially.

Perhaps understanding that self-love has been perverted by sin and "turned into narcissism" (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 559), but can through redemption be transformed to "embrace God as the best fulfillment of its desires" (p. 559), helps in clarifying the confusion concerning whether self-love is proper for the Christian or not. Self-love, in its unregenerate state, can produce abusive dynamics as much as an unregenerate self-hatred can. But when a disciple renounces one's self-created identity – whether it resulted in self-love or self-hatred – the new identity received by God begins to form a proper self-love maintained alongside a self-"hatred" that readily prioritizes others' good. Proper self-"hatred" for a Christian would be one that prioritizes a certain good for the other over a certain good for the self out of a love for God and his redemptive purposes.

It is claimed that for Jesus, "neither his teaching nor his life was devoid of self-concern" (Gill-Austern, 1996, p. 309). If this is true it may be evidence for the proper love and care for self. Jesus quoted Leviticus when he taught that we are to love our neighbor *as ourselves*

(*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Matthew 22:39, emphasis mine). This seems to hint that self-love is the foundation for self-denial in loving others. If Jesus is assuming the concept, then there must be a way to love the self in a holy way. Augustine in the fifth century and Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth may help in understanding the relationship between loving others and loving the self. Neither holds a "balancing" view, as if the disciple must give self-care and sacrificial love equal parts in one's life. Rather two themes dominate their discussions: distinguishing between proper and improper self-love, and our love for others originating in God's love for us.

Self-love and Augustine. In his book on Augustine's view of self-denying love Schlabach (2001) warns that "in order to sustain self-denial over time [Christian communities] must reintroduce considerations of self-concern into their ethic" (p. 144). Schlabach is writing from the perspective of one who has witnessed the burnout in ministry leaders and missionaries as they seek to pour themselves out for others. He shares how Augustine's view of right self-love forms a foundation for self-denying love of others. In *The City of God* Augustine claims that, "The two cities were created by two kinds of love; the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self" (Augustine, 1990 Bk. 14.28). This sounds like contempt for one's own existence is a necessary element of love for God. But in light of other writings of Augustine, in this instance it appears he is leveraging an exaggerated distinction to more strongly make his point. This literary technique, antithesis, is commonly seen in both wisdom and apocalyptic writings (Gasque, 1976, p. 203; LeMon & Strawn, 2008, p. 503; R. E. Murphy & Metzger, 2000, p. xxiii).

Compare the quote above from *City of God* with Augustine's Sermon 46 on Mark 8:34 in which he distinguishes between proper and perverse ways of loving the self: "The first destruction of man was the love of himself.… For this is to love one's self, to wish to do one's own will. Prefer to this God's will; learn to love yourself by not loving yourself" (Ser. 46.2). By not loving ourselves perversely, that is, in the wrong way, we are free to love ourselves rightly by loving ourselves in God. Schlabach (2001) explains Augustine's teaching like this: "To love one's neighbor as oneself required that one first learn right self-love through love for God" (p. 127). We are made to be satisfied in God; when we are most satisfied in God, we experience the deepest personal blessing. He created us in such a way that we flourish spiritually and psychologically most deeply when we deny ourselves as identity-makers and exalt him as the highest good above ourselves. Schlabach (2001) would say that Augustine taught that "loving and clinging to God as one's highest good is the highest and truest way to love one's self" (p. 145).

So what some Christians see as two opposing forces to be balanced, Augustine saw as complementary desires working within the healthy Christian to find peace with God. Schlabach (2001) agrees: "Augustine has held together what later traditions tended to split apart – self-love and that self-denial which plays a prominent part in the cruciform love of Jesus Christ" (p. xx). Schlabach rejects the idea of self-love always working against a holy self-denial and sacrificial love. Yes, there is a bad self-love that both Schlabach and Augustine reject; but there is also a right self-love at the foundation of a healthy self-denial and sacrificial love. Repeatedly, Schlabach uses the adjectives "right" or "proper" and "wrong" or "improper" to delineate true conceptions and misconceptions of self-love and self-denial. Because of the ambiguity in these

two terms – both self-love and self-denial can be positive or detrimental depending on the context – one needs to make definitions very clear.

Using "right" and "good" modifiers for shorthand may be helpful as long as one first describes what each idea looks like in practical terms. A good and proper self-love according to Augustine arises when one first sees God as the creator and lover of all good things. Within this context we see ourselves as good and loved creatures. Loving God, we want to love what he loves – and he loves us. In this way, Augustine teaches self-love as a foundation for self-denial. In this way self-love can be a good and godly motivation and attitude; it does not taint our love of God. Because I love myself and want to live a blessed life, I renounce my own self-making and self-judging and receive God's identity for me. This new identity, which describes myself as sacrificially loved by God, desires to love God and others sacrificially. Bernard of Clairvaux, seven hundred years later, will teach a similar truth.

Self-love and Bernard of Clairvaux. In his treatise *On Loving God* Bernard lays out four degrees of love in a rhetorically memorable manner. He lays out the love of self for self's sake as the lowest of loves and an ungodly one. But then there is a love of God for self's sake in which we appreciate and thank God for saving us and generously providing for us. According to Bernard, this is the level of love at which new believers most likely find themselves. As believers mature, however, they can achieve a higher level of love, a love of God for God's sake. Lastly is the highest and most infrequently experienced love, the love of self for God's sake (see Bernard, 2014). Bernard sees the highest and rarest love as one that actually loves the self because one has been transformed by the love of God. For him, the love of God transforms the disciple in such a way that she can love herself and others because of and through the love of God.

Bernard lived and studied within an historical theological context which "taught that love is the power removing human beings from fleshly attachments, beckoning them to embrace a genuine freedom of soul and body on the journey toward a final beatific vision" (Holder, 2009, p. 87). This is a love for God that renounces the self as interpretive center of life and that diminishes all other concerns and desires in light of his infinite excellence and eternal glory. From this foundation of loving God in all his beauty and goodness, a self-denying love for others arises which joyfully sets aside personal wants and desires in order to love sacrificially the other and work for their good.

For Bernard, as for Augustine, self-denial for the good of another is rooted in a self-denying love for God which is driven by a holy self-love. When one understands that true life is found only in a right relationship with God, the desire to have a relationship with the divine motivates a fulfilling selflessness. Once one's life is re-centered away from self and upon God, it "places people under obligation to others' needs, not out of duty but rather because others share a common nature" (Holder, 2009, p. 95). In this way, loving God puts an obligation on a Christian to love others sacrificially. Yet God supplies all that is needed to transform sacrifice into flourishing: he first loves his disciples; he gives birth to their new nature; he gives the Spirit; he gives a new identity-narrative with its new telos, significance, and purpose; he gives wisdom and an understanding of goodness; he provides a loving community that sacrificially loves the disciples as caregivers, leaders, and peers.

Both Augustine and Bernard speak of self-love as a necessity for self-denying love of God and others. Schlabach understands Augustine's dynamic as one in which the love of self motivates self-denial in order to enjoy the fulfillment of mutual love with God. But Holder sees Bernard's dynamic as somewhat different. Bernard describes self-love as a window into the

shared nature of the disciple and the beloved which motivates the Christian to sacrificially work for the good of another human being made in the same image and with similar personal experiences of the world. In essence, Bernard's self-love creates the context for sympathy. If I love myself, then I should also love that other self which is of the same nature. And a holy love of self originates out of loving and being loved by God. A disciple's love "cares for the good only on account of the better" (Bernard, 2014, p. 41). In both cases it is clear that both Augustine and Bernard see proper self-love as foundational for proper self-denial before God and biblical sacrificial living and receiving with others. Neither view self-care and sacrificial love as opposing motivations to be balanced or to be limited in any way. Rather, proper self-love, i.e. one centered in love for God, frees one to choose biblical sacrificial living out of a true benevolence for others.

Augustine and Bernard both appear to see an interdependent relationship between self-love, love for God, and love for others. We love God because God first loved us. We love God because we love ourselves and find fulfillment and blessing in loving him. We love others because God loves us. Therefore, sacrificial love for others – even asymmetrically – arises out of and expresses a proper self-love and love for God. Sacrificial love is good and powerful, transforming relationships and dynamics within communities toward mercy and justice, forgiveness, and truth.

The R-E-D nature of asymmetrical sacrifice

While loving dynamics seek mutuality, the sacrificial nature of prioritizing another's good over one's own does not always result in a symmetrical dynamic balancing giving and receiving, nor should that be the goal. The occasionally asymmetrical dynamic in some relationships can become abusive if it is not anchored in a God-centered identity and if the R-E-

D nature of love is not recognized and used to identify and reject abuse. A God-centered identity, formed by self-denial, draws disciples to grow in their assurance of value, dignity, and significance. As an actor in the true drama of bringing redemption to God's world, the disciple has a calling to Christlikeness in sacrificial loving. This role is declared to be important and significant to God, who does not measure a person's worth in the way the world does, through wealth, power, and social status. Made in the image of God and called to image God to others, disciples know that they have inherent value and dignity, regardless of ability, ethnicity, previous behavior, background, sex, and social status. Adopting God's identity for oneself frees and strengthens the disciple to love others sacrificially, even if the love is not mutual. This is why Jesus can call his followers to "love your enemy" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Matthew 5:44-45; Luke 6:27-36).

The telos of an identity-narrative given by God is a hopeful one. Disciples love sacrificially, prioritizing certain needs of others above certain of their own, because they know that such actions are approved by God, empowered by God, and will be rewarded by God. Because God is working to redeem relationships, the disciple rejoices in this hope of the glory of God (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Romans 5:2) and sacrificially loves, hoping to bring about redemption for the beloved as well as eventual mutuality for the lover and beloved. When sacrificial love seems unrequited and wearying, the disciple's walk with Jesus through the indwelling Counselor reinvigorates sacrificial labors for the good of others. As Jesus is longsuffering, the fruit of the Spirit in the disciple includes longsuffering. Disciples can sacrifice for others for a long period of time because their identities are anchored in God, and because they live in a continual experience with God through the indwelling Spirit.

Because love is relational, the disciple receives and gives love not only directly from and to God but also from and to other believers in the church. This dynamic between Spirit-filled believers in a local congregation can exemplify, motivate, and provide sacrificial love for disciples. Because love is embodied, disciples will recognize their own needs and limitations as well as those of others. Disciples can hold each other accountable to recognize and rightly serve these needs and limitations so that sacrificial love does not become abusive. If a relationship's sacrificial love is asymmetrical, it can become wearying. As a disciple grows to love the self properly in Christ, he will be able to recognize the need for self-care and can properly prioritize it for the sake of loving God and others. Jesus did this when he went out to solitary places to pray after days of sacrificial ministry to others (Matthew 14:13; Mark 1:34-35; Luke 4:41-42; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1).

Because love is dialectical, sacrificing for the good of others has a beneficial effect on those who love. They know they are fulfilling their telos. Their love and delight in Jesus increases, for their own sacrificial love reminds them of the greater sacrificial love of their Savior and Friend. They more deeply understand Jesus when they love sacrificially, seeing the fruit of his Presence in themselves and through themselves, and this increases their devotion and joy in Christ.

It is outside the parameters of this dissertation to explore how sacrificial love might look in particular cases. My goal is mostly to make a case for how sacrificial love biblically arises out of an anchored identity, and therefore can wisely and courageously reject and confront abusive dynamics. Remembering that healthy sacrificial love is relational, embodied and dialectical will help to evaluate specific situations and gauge the nature of the interactions; recognizing and resisting abusive dynamics can prevent their perpetuation. At times the benevolent action within

a particular relationship will be to press on with sacrificial love even when it is asymmetrical and unreciprocated; other times sacrificial love will mean stepping away from the relationship for a time with the loving goal of increasing the health of oneself and the other. This is a complex issue which can be very confusing or distressing for those within the relationship; no dissertation could seek to give advice without being aware of the particulars of the situation and the people involved. Therefore, finding acceptance, grace, patience and wisdom from others who know and love the people involved can be very helpful. A believing community can be a safe and fertile place to find and cultivate such helpful relationships.

At other times, the most benevolent action might be to end the relationship because abusive dynamics are present and the beloved is choosing not to change. In this case, the greatest sacrifice may not be in receiving the neglect, ingratitude, and disrespect of the beloved, but rather in experiencing loneliness for a time and an uncertain future without the beloved. In some cases, confronting the abusive beloved – in the context of a healthy and supportive community (Balswick et al., 2016, pp. 339–342; Dana, 2018, ch. 3; Herman, 1992, ch. 10) – is the most benevolent and sacrificial action to take; in more severe cases, escaping the abuser is. Deciding these complicated issues may require wise counsel, a growing understanding of what is good, and great courage.

In these first two parts I have laid out a biblical and psychological explanation for how self-denial and sacrificial love need not be dehumanizing or abusive. Self-denial is God's process for healthy personal development through renouncing one's self-written identity-narrative and receiving God's authoritative identity-narrative. This provides a disciple with a sense of value, dignity, and significance and offers a telos of self-fulfillment in God and community through sacrificial love. Sacrificial love, benevolently prioritizing another's good over one's own, even

when asymmetrical in the relationship, accomplishes God's redemptive purposes through humility, mercy, and forgiveness.

The relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of both personal development and sacrificial love are guardrails against dehumanization and abuse. When these aspects are kept in mind when denying the self before God and sacrificially giving to others, they make abusive dynamics evident and resist them. The wisdom and courage growing out of community with God and other God-followers additionally helps in curbing negative effects.

In Part Three I will explore how spiritual practices can be engaged within the local church to foster healthy self-denial and sacrificial love. Spiritual practices have developed over the centuries, yet contemporary believers can engage in them in a way that recognizes, honors and emphasizes the R-E-D nature of personhood development and interpersonal relationships in order to find grace to deepen one's self-denial before God and increase one's sacrificial love for others.

Part Three: Spiritual Practices

Having proposed a theoretical schema which demonstrates that biblical self-denial, rather than dehumanizing the disciple, makes for healthy personal development and that sacrificial love, rather than perpetuating dehumanizing dynamics, builds flourishing communities, I now turn to more practical applications. The local church can shape their discipleship processes such that they anchor identities in the Christ narrative and in their own particular community context. They can engage in practices that recognize the relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of personhood development and sacrificial love. Though the spiritual practices I discuss are quite familiar and widely practiced, casting them in the light of the R-E-D aspects of human nature and focusing on how they develop personal and communal identities can deepen the healthy effects of self-denial and sacrificial love.

In Chapter Five I demonstrate the relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of the spiritual practices and give a few warnings concerning misapplication of them. In Chapter Six I show how scripture develops identity for individuals and communities and discuss how differing sizes of scripture passages can be applied by differing sizes of groups to have differing impacts on disciples and congregations. Chapter Seven looks in detail at the often neglected spiritual practice of *examen*, a prayer of self-discovery and evaluation, and encourages congregations to develop a culture that removes hindrances to deeper self-knowledge and relational connection. Chapter Eight continues the discussion on prayer by moving from *examen* to confession and briefly showing how fasting can deepen the spiritual dynamics of other spiritual practices.

My hope is that as congregations focus on personhood development – especially identity formation – in their discipleship processes, they anchor believers in the Christ metanarrative, giving them significance and purpose to love others sacrificially. In this way self-denial becomes

the way to deep personal development and sacrificial love becomes the way to bring the community to a place of flourishing and connection.

Chapter Five: The Nature of Spiritual Practices and Some Cautions

The believer's experience of relating to God in his grace is constituted in part by practices which engage the believer with God in the context of a congregation of believers. Seeing the practices in light of their R-E-D nature and their connection with identity formation and sacrificial love can make them more deeply effective in one's personal and communal relations with Christ. This chapter discusses the need to intentionally include personhood development, especially identity formation, in one's conscious engagement in spiritual practices. Because this may sound overly psychological, I address the tension which exists for some between what is seen as secular psychology and spiritual activities. I then explain how the relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of personhood development sheds light on the purpose and implementation for spiritual practices. I close by offering three cautions to the local church concerning spiritual practices: spiritual bypassing, mission drift, and emphasizing work over grace.

Spiritual formation is personhood development

In her efforts to make disciples who are engaged in God's restorative purposes – loving others sacrificially in a redemptive way – the local church might consider including the development of mature personhood in her discipleship goals. Because spiritual formation occurs in the context of human lives, "it is necessary to explore the nature of human personhood as a matter of foundational experience to Christian spirituality and spiritual formation" (Demarest, 2011a, p. 71). The call of Jesus to self-denial is a call to personhood development and sacrificial love within community relationships; therefore the telos of the local church's discipleship process must be mature personhood that loves sacrificially. Disciple formation needs to engage more deeply than mere cognitive learning so that it includes emotional maturity and anchored

identity, for “unless we integrate emotional maturity as a focus in our discipleship, we are in danger of missing God’s point completely – love” (Scazzero & Bird, 2010, p. 19). The theoretical schema outlined in the first four chapters reveals that sacrificial love is not abusive when it flows from an anchored identity within a maturing personhood. But even when discipleship includes emotional and relational health, it can yet neglect conscious identity-formation. The telos, dignity, and significance rising up from a Christ-given identity are crucial in keeping sacrificial love from slipping into abusive patterns. And this can inform discipleship processes.

Because of the current culture in the twenty-first century West, without close attention the local church’s spiritual practices might slip into a focus on cognitive-heavy activities such as reading, memorization, and assenting to certain doctrinal truths. Hall and Hall (2021) have commented on this emphasis on the intellect to the detriment of deeper transformation in discipleship, describing current trends as adopting “a linear rationalistic process rather than a nonlinear relational process” (p.8). They quote a recent Barna study which “noted that in many churches ‘there is an assumption that the appropriation of biblical knowledge will by itself lead to spiritual maturity’” (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 8). Hall and Hall (2021) understand this as a “rationalistic paradigm of knowing God, ourselves and others” (p.8). The goal of discipleship is to form people who love like Jesus does, and there is much more to forming good lovers than merely instructing them. Therefore, “Christian spirituality should be grounded in a healthy regard for personal identity and self-efficacy” (Getahun, 2011, p. 742). Effective discipleship seeks to reach deeply within the personhood of disciples to transform their identity and agency by the power of the Spirit working in God’s community of believers.

Peter Scazzero (2003/2010) is a pastor who has realized that spiritual maturity requires emotional, psychological, and relational health: “I as a leader had to undergo a revolution in the way I understood and approached discipleship” (p. 17). He came to see in his own life, as well as in the lives of his leaders and congregation, “a stage of spiritual immaturity that current models of discipleship have not addressed” (p. 18). I concur with Scazzero; the deeper elements of personhood which drive the often unconscious behavior patterns in people have been neglected by many contemporary discipleship formulations. Personal redemption through Christ in the Spirit involves a deep transformation of human personhood; discipleship is the process of leading a believer through this deep personal transformation.

The human self is complex, “like deep water” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Proverbs 20:5), and so is impossible for a human being to completely understand – though at times a wise person can “draw it out” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Proverbs 20:5). But since it is the deeper places, those personal dynamics not consciously known or contemplated, which drive much feeling and choosing, “transformation needs to take place at the level of our implicit relational knowledge” (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 228). This hidden part of one’s personal dynamic is sometimes called “gut level” or “intuitive” (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 97), what Christopher Bollas (1987) refers to as “unthought knowns” (quoted in Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 103). Much of current discipleship practices of the local church do not reach the “implicit relational knowledge” of their disciples, even though disciples struggle to engage in healthy sacrificial living without transformed “unthought knowns.”

Therefore, discipleship must be more than gaining facts through the scriptures; it is a whole-person meaning-making process which occurs, in part, through story-telling. Narrative, then, is a “deeper and more direct form of knowledge than grasping a proposition in an

intellectual sense" (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 238). The dynamics and practices which influence identity formation need to be consciously undertaken, because this current generation wrestles with questions concerning identity (see Trueman, 2020). Where recent generations asked questions such as, "What is true?" and "How do I know something is true?" the current and upcoming generations are asking more existential questions, such as "Who am I?" (Healey & Woods, 2020), and "Do I choose who I am or do I discover who I am? Am I important? How can I become significant?" Today, it is unmet affective needs, more than cognitive ones, that leave people feeling empty and looking for fulfillment. The gospel addresses both objective and subjective concerns and there is no need to neglect one for the sake of the other. However, our current culture is in great need of bringing objective truth into the service of finding affective solutions to meet the emptiness created by alienation from God.

According to Dallas Willard's model, spiritual formation means "adopting the narratives of Jesus on key issues like the character of God the Father, the nature of human person as an embodied soul, and the reality of the present kingdom of God" (Smith, 2022, p. 45). This understanding of spiritual formation encompasses my emphasis on the narrative nature of identity by connecting spiritual practices with identity-forming narratives. Strawn and Brown (2020) also recognize the importance of narrative in developing personhood and relationships in the local congregation when they state that "the nature of spiritual formation a church engenders in its parishioners depends heavily on what kind of narrative exists at the core of the life of the particular church" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 90).

The spiritual practices I consider below are not rare; they are "common to almost all Christians" (Rosner & Trueman, 2022, p. 194). However, because "many Christians would not realize their identity-forming and identity-confirming power" (Rosner & Trueman, 2022, p. 194),

the local church might seek to become more intentional in developing the implementation of spiritual practices in such a way that personal and community transformation is more deeply experienced. Scripture, for example, contains the Christ metanarrative which can provide specific significance and purpose to disciples when approached with identity formation in mind. Prayer, specifically self-examination, confession, and accepting forgiveness, also transforms the disciple's understanding and acceptance of the self. And fasting can aid the identity-forming dynamics of spiritual practices by providing deeper self-knowledge. The discussion in the following chapters will more clearly make the connection between spiritual practices and identity formation.

For those whose Christian discipleship has not exposed them to teaching on psychological processes and theories, talk of identity-formation and emotional health can sound and feel secular. E. L. Johnson (2007) takes 100 pages (pp. 25-128) to lay out the history of the relationship between secular psychology and Christian soul care. The discussion is related to the current topic of the role of spiritual practices in developing personhood and healthy communities. E. L. Johnson (2007) refers to "the Christian counseling wars" in which "Christians of various stripes have come to different understandings of how the bible ought to operate within Christian soul care in the light of the enormous literature put out by proponents of modern psychology" (p. 25). The tension between accepting, adjusting, or rejecting the findings of secular psychology will not disappear any time soon, for "psychology and theology are unavoidable parts of human experience and spirituality" (Sandage, 2011, p. 192).

I presuppose that psychological research and conceptualizations fall into the category of natural revelation, as long as the Christian scriptures are held as the hermeneutical authority over natural revelation. While the concepts and vocabulary of my proposal may seem foreign to some

within the local church, they also may be readily accepted within the current cultural milieu which is deeply concerned with both identity and dehumanization. Regardless of one's readiness or hesitancy in accepting psychological language when speaking of discipleship, perhaps it can be agreed that "two thousand years after Christ's ministry on earth, we are still largely in moral, emotional, and spiritual adolescence" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. xxii).

Masters (2010) connects spiritual practices with psychological development, claiming that "any spiritual path, Eastern or Western, that does not deal in real depth with psychological issues, and deal with these in more than spiritual contexts, is setting itself up for an abundance of spiritual bypassing" (p. 12). I will discuss spiritual bypassing later in this chapter when I address cautions concerning spiritual practices. But for now, Masters's quote serves to emphasize the expectation and desire for psychological depth of transformation when engaged in spiritual practices for discipleship. While spiritual practices have a psychological as well as spiritual effect on practitioners, they are "not the same as psychological counseling. Psychological therapies tend to focus on self-image, relationships or work issues in a problem-solving way.… Your relationship with God is really the heart of spiritual [practices], whatever else you may be dealing with in life" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 123). Nor is spiritual formation a "substitute for psychotherapy or counseling. Both are processes that seek growth into wholeness" (Rosner & Trueman, 2022, p. 165). Psychotherapy and spiritual formation practices are not the same process dressed in different clothes; they both can have deeply transformative effects, keeping in mind that personal and spiritual development cannot be clearly delineated. So a Christian might hold that "we could not find a better team of allies than integrative psychotherapy and spiritual practice" (Masters, 2010, p. 67).

Distinctions between psychotherapy and spiritual practices include their goals and techniques, as well as their effects. Psychotherapy is a means to an end, while spiritual practices serve to bring one into the presence of God within the context of the believing community, and so are conducted within a context which is an end in itself, that is, loving communion with God and others. Therapy involves activities that are adopted in order to achieve a higher good; the activities themselves can be set aside as the goal is reached. In contrast, spiritual practices are not tools for a greater good, but a way of expressing one's relationship with God among God's people; these relationships aren't ever to be set aside.

The R-E-D nature of spiritual practices

Although practices for spiritual formation have a long history in the church, many in today's evangelical church have lost sight of the effectiveness of daily and weekly practices for personal and communal development. Unfortunately, in contemporary times "many Christians remain unfamiliar with the deeper patterns of spiritual discipline that root us in God's transforming love, … that bring us to mature humanity" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. xxiii). Looking back historically can remind the contemporary church of these "deeper patterns." Foster and Griffin (2007) outline distinctive aspects of medieval spirituality which might shed some light on current engagement in spiritual practices: inwardness, the role of the affections, an emphasis on experience, well-defined patterns of contemplation, and the importance of the individual (p.184). Some of these elements can be found in contemporary culture and therefore be an opening of interest for today's disciples; other elements might seem strange. Many of the developments in spiritual formation occurring in the medieval age were challenged by the Reformers in the sixteenth century (Holt, 2017, p. 116). Some of the disciplines involved habits which the reformers rejected theologically and practically, such as repetitive praying through the

rosary to Mary, the mother of Jesus. However, the works-theology found in some instances of some of the practices is not inherent in the practices themselves; rather, a modern congregation could adopt some of the historical practices while maintaining evangelical theology.

There were differing opinions among the Reformers concerning activities that weren't described in the bible; some reformers followed Zwingli's approach – "If the bible did not command a given practice, that practice was an invention" – while others fell more in line with Luther's approach – "If a practice did not contradict Scripture, it was approved" (Holt, 2017, p. 127). Regardless of the reasons, the fruit of rejecting many spiritual practices in the sixteenth century is an ignorance today of the habits which our spiritual forefathers found helpful in building spiritual maturity and community. Many of these practices - such as silence, weekly communion, extended prayer in the worship service, and the general use of the physical senses (M. J. Thompson, 2015, pp. 58, 64) – would not be contrary to contemporary evangelical theology. The general loss of liturgy and mystery in some evangelical worship experiences may be hindering personal and communal spiritual growth. Add to this the current culture which values productivity, speed, and busyness and the result seems to be a stunted experience of identity, agency, community and mutual sacrificial living. Many in the evangelical church, then, would benefit from adopting certain elements of these experiences without bringing in the theology that is historically (but not inherently) connected to them.

Spiritual practices are relational. When engaging in spiritual practices their R-E-D nature can be kept in the forefront. Because spiritual practices are so closely related to personhood development and loving others, and because these two dynamics are relational, embodied, and dialectical, the expectation would be that spiritual practices of the local church reflect this same nature. Nevertheless, "today there is a strong emphasis on practicing the

disciplines almost in isolation" (J. B. Smith, 2022, p. 45), such as what most evangelicals might envision with "personal devotions." The relationality of spiritual practices in many places has become forgotten to a large degree. This may render them less effective in creating the inner resources and capabilities necessary for engaging in non-abusive sacrificial love. Remembering the relational nature of spiritual practices and engaging in them within a social context can be very beneficial, because "for most people [spiritual disciplines] remained just an individual effort. Without communities, continued growth is very difficult" (J. B. Smith, 2022, p. 47).

Spiritual practices are relational in that they are engaged in within a community. Every community of believers has a set of religious practices in which they engage one another and God; their practices are the wineskin holding the wine of conscious relationship. The community's culture, and the individual's place in it, is experienced within the context of practices repeated through the year and from year to year. In essence, seasonal and regular communal activities define the culture, for "our identities as persons are constituted by practices and the knowledge and relationships they mediate.… Correlatively, communal life is constituted by practices. Communities do not just engage in practices; in a sense they *are* practices" (Dykstra in N. C. Murphy et al., 1997, p. 173). So a local church can adapt how it engages in specific practices for its own context and culture according to its goals and purposes.

Spiritual practices are relational in that they influence and transform not only the disciple, but also the disciple's community which makes up the environment in which the experiences take place; "we engage in personal disciplines not for ourselves, or to feel something spiritual … but for the sake of the church and for the world" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 109). Spiritual practices are both an individual and a communal experience; they are individual-within-community and individual-for-community experiences. This reflects the relational nature of

personhood development and sacrificial love. Byron Anderson (2003) warns us against the "objectification and decontextualization" of the practices (p. 105), saying "it's easy to approach a practice as if it could stand apart from its social, political and cosmological contexts" (p. 104).

One does not merely engage in spiritually transforming activities in order to become a better person; rather, these practices are the means by which life is experienced with God and other believers. Personal improvement and growth occur in the context of the church community, for the sake of the community, and in turn this results in the glory of God as his people live together in his presence. As disciples mature, they will discover that spiritual practices do more than simply occur within a particular context, they are actually reshaping the very relationships which make up their context. One's relationships with God and one another are the ends and the means and the environment within which the spiritual exercises are practiced.

Marjorie Thompson (2015) warns against certain cultural forces that work against the relational dynamic of spiritual transformation. In addition to rationalism's focus on cognition, she includes technological advances – which are the source of "enormous social dislocation" – and the glorification of superficial values. These cultural forces have affected those in the church, too, for many times "we lack a deep sense of purpose that calls us to sacrifice individual desires for the sake of a larger good" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 3). Here she connects spiritual practices to personal and communal purpose and to sacrificial living in a way that mirrors my approach. "A deep sense of purpose" is a fruit of identity formation. I make the same connection by conceptualizing identity formation as creating and clarifying a telos of loving others sacrificially. Spiritual practices reform the disciple's identity-narrative and therefore sharpen the disciple's vision of flourishing community through sacrificial love.

The relational nature and purpose of spiritual practices is of greater import than the common approach in evangelical circles in which personal transformation is an end in itself. Rather, "fidelity to communal life enhances the Christian life more than personal piety" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 87). It can even be said that personal piety is dependent on communal life, for "the process of surfacing and working through [one's personal psychological and spiritual issues] is for the most part relationally based" (Masters, 2010, p. 45). So mature personhood depends on the community just as a flourishing community depends on the maturity of the people involved.

Spiritual practices are embodied. In addition to being relational by nature, spiritual practices are also embodied. The embodiedness of spiritual practices are important because spiritual growth is physically experienced, for "the Christian life is not primarily constituted by inward, private spiritual thriving, or by giving intellectual assent to propositional beliefs, but is rather an embodied, enacted and extended life" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 109). As seen in this quote, for Strawn and Brown (2020) "embodied" means that life, relationships, and spirituality are experienced in and through our bodies. Their use of the word "enacted" emphasizes the necessity of our thoughts and beliefs being expressed in actions. And by "extended" they mean that spiritual thriving always occurs within a web of social relationships (p. 107). Lysaught (2000) agrees, claiming, "Any consideration of the relationship between Christian practices and the Christian life must necessarily attend to the ways in which bodies are engaged and produced" (p.258). The embodiedness of people encourages us to see spiritual practices as more than a cognitive educational engagement. Catechesis must be more than classroom work. Lysaught (2000) lifts up the military and athletics as examples of other groups who understand that physical activity –actually doing what is being instructed – is essential to true training in any human endeavor (pp. 265-266).

Recognizing the embodiment of relationships and spirituality can inform both the contexts in which and the methods by which spiritual exercises are engaged. Embodiment widens the scope of expression of spirituality from personal piety to social concern, and “if embodied life is primary (instead of individual or internal) then spiritual practices of public worship, the building up of the community, the service of those in need, and participation in the struggle for justice and peace" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 31) will become as important and as much an expression of one’s second nature in Christ as prayer and scripture reading are.

Because the spiritual disciplines are embodied, care can be taken when engaging in those practices – such as fasting, for example – which more deeply involve the body, for people may have differing health requirements and situations. Love for each individual will guide and guard the local church from taking a “one size fits all” approach to the physical aspects of spiritual practices. An action beneficial for one disciple might be detrimental to another. For example, in general, slow deep breaths lead the body to relax; however, some people who have experienced trauma can become unsettled when they feel their body relax. They are not comfortable being comfortable; they become anxious when their body slows down because that state is unfamiliar and frightening. It might take one to three months of breathing exercises in a safe environment for the bodies of some who have experienced trauma to respond to deep breathing with a sense of safety instead of danger (Dana, 2018, pp. 135-136). This is important for disciplers to be aware of when leading large groups in spiritual practices. For the majority of people, “the breathing, quieting and ‘centering’ so frequently recommended in prayer are simply ways of helping us focus on the One we wish to be with” (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 33). However, sensitive leaders will strive to include those who are exceptions to a general rule, so that they do

not feel isolated from the group, or less spiritual, or that they are incapable of being transformed by the Spirit.

Spiritual practices are dialectical. In addition to being relational and embodied, spiritual practices can be seen as dialectical in their processes of personal and communal transformation. In general, this means one can expect that the tearing down (deconstruction, renunciation, or repentance) and rebuilding (edification, adoption, or reception and acceptance) aspects within the practices will depend on each other. Traditionally, there is a threefold schema to how the spiritual exercises create growth: purgative, illuminative and unitive (Holt, 2017, p. 113). Ignatius termed these as examination, meditation, and contemplation (Ignatius, 1522/1999, pp. 10–20, 27). The purgative is a process of self-examination and confession of whatever is unchristlike in one's attitudes and behaviors throughout the day. This is a renouncing and a letting go, parallel to the rejecting of self-authority in the process of self-denial. The illuminative phase is a filling of the mind and heart with the Word of God and truth from one's counselors and spiritual advisors. While it appears strongly cognitive, the cognition can be seen as the door through which truth can enter, confront, and edify the inner dynbamics within the disciple and the community. As Thomas à Kempis (1420?/1940) stated, "It is not learning that makes man holy and just, but a virtuous life makes him pleasing to God. I would rather feel contrition than know how to define it" (3:37). The unitive phase of spiritual practices is a whole-person engagement with God, a seeking after the beatific vision in which no part of the disciple is an obstacle to loving God and others.

These three steps seem to fit well into a dialectical view of personhood development. The purgative and illuminative phases work as mutual emptying and filling, parallel to the renouncing and receiving of identity-narratives. The unitive phase is the telos for spiritual

practices and spiritual formation – intimacy with God and also with others. This intimacy will require sacrificial love. Within this context sacrificial love becomes the means through which God brings flourishing to individuals-in-community and to the congregation as a whole. Many contemporary evangelical churches with a focus on cognitive learning and celebration (preaching and musical worship), will find the purgative and unitive practices more challenging, but building them into the practice of spiritual exercises adds context and enhances the power and purpose of the illuminative process.

Adapting the engagement of spiritual practices to recognize their R-E-D nature can change all the dynamics of the local congregation from Sunday morning worship to the administration of church business. As we seek to meet the wider and deeper affective and subjective needs of disciples, we will need to begin measuring success more through the lens of beauty, truth, and goodness and less through the lens of numbers and statistics (Sweet, doctoral class, February 11, 2020). The local church might explore evaluating its effectiveness in discipleship by asking questions like: Are we teaching all of scripture as one narrative and do our disciples show evidence of adopting it as part of their own story? How well are we listening to the narratives of our disciples? Are we gently correcting false narratives in a nonjudgmental manner? Is our church a safe place for relationships? In what ways are our disciples living more sacrificially than before? How are we providing ways for the deeper places of our people to be reached and changed? Asking these kinds of questions reshapes goals and redefines success for the local church, and may help a local church become more open to spiritual practices which aid deeper transformation.

Cautions concerning spiritual practices

As I strongly encourage the local church to engage in spiritual practices for the purpose of personhood development and non-abusive sacrificial love, I also mention three cautions: spiritual bypassing, mission drift, and focusing on works over grace. Winner (2018) finds within spiritual practices a "propensity for violence, for curvature, for being exploited for the perpetuation of damage rather than received for its redress" (Winner, 2018, p. 14). In a congregation with unhealthy dynamics, spiritual practices can be adopted in such a way that controlling or abusive dynamics continue, are reinforced, and get expressed through the very means intended to eliminate such dehumanization. Masters (2010) agrees, noting that "even the most exquisitely designed spiritual methodologies can become traps" (p. 14). One reason detrimental dynamics may be reinforced through the engagement of spiritual practices may be the lack of humble and deep self-examination, that is, "the inability of people to assess, or even consider, whether the object of their pursuit is the kind of thing they should be pursuing" (Winner, 2018, p. 83). When the purgative dynamic is neither honest nor open, the illuminative and unitive aspects are hamstrung as well because these processes are dialectically connected.

Spiritual bypassing. My first caution, spiritual bypassing, is closely related to the lack of deep introspection. First coined by John Welwood in 1989 (Masters, 2010, p. 10), spiritual bypassing is the "use of practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs" (Masters, 2010, p. 11; see also Jastrzebski, 2022, p. 158). The danger is seeing in one's spiritual experience of the practices a healing or wholeness that is not truly there because a focus on outward behaviors can blind us to our deeply and unconsciously held beliefs, judgments, and attitudes. The Christian must remember that victory comes through the cross, and that life is only found after walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Without the continuing experience of self-denial as described by Jesus, the

Christian's attempt at sacrificial love may continue to be abusive or damaging to truth, beauty, and goodness in relationships.

What is needed to work through spiritual bypassing is what F. Sheen (2011) terms "inner nakedness" which consists of "contact with oneself [and] … surrendering all one's weaknesses to a merciful God" (Jastrzebski, 2022, p. 167). Masters (2010) simply terms this "vulnerability" (p. 19). Belief in the mercy of God shown in Jesus Christ frees disciples to open to the truth about themselves – their weaknesses, addictions, false pretensions, and sins as well as their dignity, significance, and purpose. One evidence that spiritual bypassing is lessening its grip on the disciple is "an existential acceptance of the presence of suffering in their life" (Jastrzebski, 2022, p. 169). Spiritual bypassing tends to ignore or belittle one's pains and struggles in order to emphasize Christ's power, victory, and ability to heal. But when suffering is accepted as a walking companion in the Christian life, it allows the disciple to better understand Jesus and what loving others sacrificially looks like. There is a need to "change their image of God … from *God as deliverer* to *God who allows difficulty*" (Jastrzebski, 2022, p. 169 ital. orig.). The acceptance of this truth allows for more honest self-examination which leads to deeper illumination, and deeper communion with God and others.

Mission drift. To outgrow spiritual bypassing "in part means releasing spirituality … from the obligation to make us feel better or more secure or more whole" (Masters, 2010, p. 14). Masters here is recognizing the relationship between spiritual bypassing and my second caution, mission drift, in which the true purposes for spiritual practices are hijacked by lesser and perhaps misaligned motives. Mission drift is not just a contemporary problem, for Augustine in the fourth century was concerned to maintain the reason and focus for spiritual practices. He knew "that we

sometimes engage in spiritual practices to prove to ourselves and others how devoted we really are" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 67).

Commenting on the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus teaches us to perform our religious practices in secret so as not to be seen by others, Augustine says, "our entire striving is to be directed towards inward joys, to keep ourselves from seeking outward rewards and becoming conformed to this world" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p, 68). This guidance is not so much about individualistic spirituality as it is about not getting distracted from the original purpose for which disciples engage in the practices. The reason for spiritual practices is "learning greater intimacy and freedom in our relationship with God … giving the Spirit time and space to rearrange our interior furniture - setting our disordered priorities and putting love of God and neighbor center stage" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. xxiii). This language of reordering loves resonates with Jesus's call to deny oneself and put one's identity-forming relationship with him above one's identity-forming relationships with family and social groups. The goal is to engage in an ever-deepening sacrificial love for God and others from an increasingly-anchored identity. Such realities will help to avoid, confront and reject abusive dynamics.

Neither spiritual maturity, nor the spiritual disciplines, nor an anchored identity, nor sacrificial love are an end in themselves. The disciplines can "become a form of idolatry [when] the means becomes the end" (J. B. Smith, 2022, pp. 45–46). Because traditions and practices of our churches "determine, at least in part, the understanding or nature of the Christian 'self' to be constructed" (Anderson, 2003, p. 114), care must be taken so that the type and form of spiritual exercises adopted by the local body are truly pointing disciples toward the relational ends for which they were intended.

Works over grace. A third caution when engaging in spiritual practices is emphasizing one's efforts over God's work in the experience. Because spiritual formation is mutually empowered by God and the disciple, emphasizing the human actor to the lessening of the divine one can distort one's understanding of the process. The human activity in spiritual practices is only one part of the experience, "the second part is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the third is learning how to see life's trials and events in light of God's presence and power" (J. B. Smith, 2022, p. 45). That third part is an act of self-denial, giving up one's interpretation of life in which events are understood in relation to the self and accepting God's interpretation in which circumstances have a meta-meaning beyond the self's immediate concerns.

Gregory the Great in the sixth century, seeing the danger of viewing spiritual growth as a reward for one's efforts, recognized "the need for human decision and will, but with God's help through prayer and by hearing the word of God" (Olson in Houston, 2018, p. 237). So as one speaks of exercise and discipline and practice, it is best to remember that "spiritual transformation is a work of grace. It is what God does in us.… The disciplines themselves are not transformative.… Transformative grace comes to us not through our own doing but as pure gift" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. xiii). Like a farmer preparing a field for seed or a sailor setting his sail to catch the prevailing wind, the disciple does the work necessary to receive, but it is God who works, wills, energizes, and gives transformation. The human will and the divine will interweave for the same purpose so that "the Christian spiritual life joins the divine intent for us with our own intent to love and serve God more completely" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 163).

For the purposes of this work, I have chosen two spiritual practices to address in light of the R-E-D nature of personhood development and sacrificial love. While "unanimity on what the constitutive practices of the Christian life are … is unlikely" (Craig Dykstra in N. C. Murphy et

al., 1997, p. 174), the experience of Christians through the millennia of church history have led to several practices becoming more commonly engaged for developing the inner person and community relationships. Dykstra's (1997) list includes interpreting scripture, worship and prayer, confession and reconciliation, service, witness, social criticism, and the mutual bearing of suffering (p. 174). He notes that Margaret Miles includes ascetic practices and sacraments (Dykstra in Murphy et al., 1997, p. 175). Holt (2017) realizes "there is no finite list of spiritual practices … but certain actions have been seen as particularly valuable" for spiritual transformation (p. 9).

While there are many spiritual practices that could be discussed which seem to especially establish one's identity in Christ and the congregation – such as the Lord's Supper, and musical praise (Hall & Hall, 2021, pp. 266–267), as well as baptism, service, and working for social justice – I will only look into two as examples for all: Bible reading (Chapter Six), and prayer and confession (Chapters Seven and Eight). As a significant addendum, I will also speak briefly on fasting in Chapter Eight. While these exercises may already be part of some disciples' spiritual regimen, it will be valuable to revisit them specifically in light of anchoring one's identity in the Christ metanarrative and in light of the relational, embodied, and dialectical aspects of personhood development that sacrificial love might remain healthy and non-abusive.

Chapter Six: Scripture in Personhood Development and Sacrificial Love: Metanarrative and Meditation

Scripture reading is a common spiritual practice among Christians. The Christian scriptures are integrated deeply into the liturgy of many churches and close to 60% of Protestants read the bible a few times a week or more (Lifeway Research, 2019). The purpose of this chapter is to encourage the local church to engage in scripture reading in light of the R-E-D nature of spiritual development, intentionally focusing on the Christian scripture's role in identity-formation for healthy sacrificial loving. I begin by offering two correctives against common errors in reading scripture for spiritual growth. Then I explore how the R-E-D nature of scripture reading can protect sacrificial love from becoming abusive by strengthening personhood and building community. With the R-E-D context in mind, I look at the advantages of reading differing sizes of scripture portions within differing sizes of groups. Engaging with larger sections of scripture can more easily address its identity-forming metanarrative while communal meditation on smaller portions can guide transformation into disciples who love sacrificially.

Two correctives on scripture reading

Two common errors in reading scripture as a spiritual practice are: (1) assuming that the Christian scriptures are mainly for information which automatically leads to transformation; and (2) practicing scripture reading as a tool or technique. Addressing the first error, Christians will want to engage scripture with openness to forming their affections and motivations, of which we have varying levels of consciousness. While gaining information does not automatically influence deeper dynamics within the human person, the Holy Spirit can move through the scriptures to transform disciples in the hidden places as they read the scripture, engaging with other believers to apply it to known areas. The reason the Spirit inspired the scriptures was "to

shape the people of God in particular ways – to cultivate certain devotions, beliefs, desires and actions – to prize some things and to despise others" (Dryden, 2018, p. xvi). Concerning the second error, scripture reading is to be a communal experience with God, a loving relationship with the Divine Person that forms the context in which transformation occurs. This transformation could be described as closer alignment with God's desire for human beings, i.e. Christlikeness, in personal holiness as well as communal relationships.

Overemphasizing the cognitive. If the local church culture emphasizes the cognitive aspect of learning to the neglect of identity formation and other emotional-psychological dynamics, the Bible may be read for information instead of transformation. The Reformers taught that faith was more than knowledge (*notitia)* and even more than agreement (*assensus*); biblical faith also includes trust (*fiducia*) (Ligonier Ministries, 2012). In order to gain knowledge, agree with God's Word, and grow in trust "we Christians will need to learn to read the Scriptures 'over-against ourselves' rather than simply 'for ourselves'" (Fowl & Jones in N. C. Murphy et al., 1997, p. 124). "Over against" assumes a certain antagonism between how the disciple is currently loving and how he ought to love. An "over against" approach to the scriptures opens the reader to be changed in understanding, relating, and prioritizing.

It is true that formation needs information on which to base its direction and motivation, but gaining information does not automatically guarantee to transform the receiver. The one who hears information but isn't transformed by it is castigated in the scriptures. In the closing of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls the one who hears without obeying a fool, while the one who, because of the words of the Christ, exchanges the foundation of his life from his own understanding to the one presented by Jesus and then builds on it is called wise (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Matthew 7:24-27). Similarly, James compares the one who hears

the information but doesn't correct his behavior to someone who looks in a mirror and then walks away without fixing his appearance (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, James 1:23-24). The obedience called for is a result of new desires and changing identity-narratives, not a mere reformation of behavior. It is easier for the church to teach facts about God and his expectations for his children; it is harder to form personal and communal identity, one of the intended purposes for the scriptures in a believer's and a church's life.

Using scripture as a tool. The second danger is to engage in scripture as a tool to accomplish a certain task. Instead of viewing scripture reading as a means to a higher end, it can be enjoyed as the environment in which God's children walk with him, as part of the conversation with a loving Creator who desires his children to image him in the world. This change in perspective can motivate opening the "deeper" elements of the disciple's life to God. So scripture is approached not so much as "a body of information, a technique, a method, or a model," but as "a *mode of being* in relationship with God" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 18). Christians, then, read scripture in order to know and love God more fully, but also as the context in which they live in the Spirit, who inspired and preserved the words and illuminates them in their inner being. Transformation occurs because, as a believer reads or hears the scriptures, the divine nature of the Word of God allows for a Spirit-filled encounter with God, a relational, embodied, and dialectical process involving the Spirit working in and through the scriptures and the congregation in the disciple's and community's life.

Mulholland (2000) wants scripture reading to have this kind of impact in the "deeper levels of our being" (pp. 22–23), the sometimes unknown places from which our motivations arise. Wesley, too, taught that the cognitive and affective "must be conjoined in mutual interdependence" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 65). This is the heart of self-denial, renouncing one's

previous interpretation of creation's purpose and one's place in it while adopting God's purpose for oneself. The metanarrative of the scriptures is that God has made each human being with dignity and the mission to image him in the world and to the world. Sacrificial love becomes the manner in which the disciple manifests God's love. Sacrificial love will not dehumanize disciples who are becoming more mature people as they grow in their walk with Christ.

The R-E-D nature of scripture reading as a spiritual practice

Scripture reading as a spiritual practice also has a R-E-D nature, in line with the relational, embodied, and dialectical nature of personhood development. Mulholland recognizes the connection between personal development and congregational flourishing when he describes spiritual formation as "the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 25). Sacrificial love is the connecting piece; a disciple developing strong personhood will, like Christ, sacrificially love others in a manner which can contribute to communal health. The relationality of scripture reading as a spiritual practice is manifested in the role of the Spirit with the reader as well as in how disciples read the bible alongside commentary by other Christians from across the globe and from other historical periods.

Scripture reading is embodied, though this aspect of personhood development is usually more recognized in other practices. Speech-act theory proposes that the act of speaking can change the environment; it accomplishes things (Sbisà et al., 2013, pp. 1–5). When a duly ordained authority says, "I baptize you," or "I pronounce you man and wife," or "I bequeath to you," or "I knight you," the people involved are not the same after the pronouncement as they were before it. The words accomplished an effect. Speech can have both an illocutionary facet – the intended meaning of the words – and a perlocutionary facet – the effect produced by the

statement (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 197). God has both an intended meaning and an intended effect for his written word, as Johnson (2007) describes in the counseling environment:

> The bottom line is that Scripture needs to be assimilated by counselors and counselees in such a way that its fullest soul-reforming potential is tapped. This requires reading individual passages, mindful of their original context and relation to the rest of Scripture, in order best to discern their perennial soul-care relevance (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 200).

Stories do more than inform; they develop ethics by encouraging action towards a specific direction for an expressed meaning. From this perspective, "the central Christian narrative, the gospel, [has] the primary force of an identity narrative" with cognitive and affective effects that are "indispensable to the meaning of any human utterance" (McClendon, 2002, p. 349). In other words, when we see ourselves in the cosmic narrative, we want to do something about it; we are motivated to participate in it. More than just knowing about the battle between good and evil, living in the gospel story drives us to "overcome evil with good" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Romans 12:21). This is mythology that has truly happened (and is happening) in space and time, and we all are players in it, as C. S. Lewis (1931) recognized when he wrote that "the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the other [pagan myths], but with this tremendous difference that it *really happened*" (Lewis, 2004, p. 1, emph. orig.). And believing that what "really happened" in the past is part of my and my congregation's purpose, I am moved along with them to work in physical space and present time to contribute to the consummation of that purpose. Local churches and individual believers embody the gospel, manifesting it in their contexts through their loving actions.

Additionally, since human disciples are embodied, the physical space within which they read the scriptures matters. The individual believer can establish a consistent place in which he or she regularly engages in personal study and the small group, too, seeks a consistent and comfortable place to meet regularly. This aids the mind against distraction and helps build habitual practices with the consistent sights, sounds, smells, and touch of the space. If consistency is not established, or a suitably non-distracting place is not found, the location of the bible reading can become an obstacle to spiritual reading (Mulholland, 2000, p. 140), so "we should establish separate places where we can instruct and form each other to be disciples and wise readers" (Fowl & Jones in N. C. Murphy et al., 1997, p. 115). Pragmatically, the separate places help with concentration and to escape everyday routines. Conceptually, choosing a separate place allows for separating from and renouncing any unwanted influences of the culture in which the disciple "normally" lives.

Embodiedness can help scriptural reading become more effective in at least one other way, as well. Mulholland (2000) suggests the "If-you-were-there technique" (pp. 154–155) to aid in setting the reader in the story. It involves the reader/listener putting themselves in the story through the imagination, asking themselves questions such as, "What would I see, smell, feel, touch, taste, if I were there at the time with those people? What emotions would I feel if I were part of this conversation or activity? How would I react to these people and events?" The answers to these questions are about the reader's/listener's body in space and time. But they also serve to engage the imagination in envisioning how the reader's/listener's body would react and engage in the near future because of this story. Hearing and reading the story of the bible "feed[s] our imagination regarding the future" and "guide[s] the unfolding of our Christian lives" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 126).

The dialectical process of spiritual formation through bible reading involves the tearing down of wrong ideas and of malformation of the self through receiving truth and adopting God's interpretation of life and the self. Disciples can have several responses when engaging with the Christian scriptures. For example, they can skim over or rationalize their own sinful attitudes, but this hinders the deep transformation the Spirit seeks to achieve within the relationship. In these kinds of cases we might be manipulating "the scripture to authenticate our 'false self,' our pervasive structures of self-referenced being, and to resist God's call to our true self, that self that is actualized through radical abandonment to God" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 22). In this quote, Mulholland reflects on the role of self-denial in spiritual transformation and envisions a "false self" and a "true self" at odds with one another. Dialectically speaking, the disciple is invited to renounce the old self which Mulholland describes as "self-referenced" by adopting the new which is "God-referenced," that is, dependent on and receptive to God's description of one's meaning and purpose. This mirrors my description of self-denial in Chapter Two.

The dismantling or renouncing of the old way of thinking, reacting, believing, and understanding life and the self is how we describe what the Medievals called the "purgative" aspect of spiritual practices. In a purgative dynamic "the Word of God is disruptive because our perspective is deeply flawed" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 103). Out of love, Jesus invites us to self-denial so that we can take on the more glorious and blessed self which he intends for us to enjoy in him. Through the scriptures Jesus "calls us to … the abandonment of our false self to God. [He] calls us to our true identity" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 103). Gaining a true identity sounds exciting and pleasurable, but the purgative half of that dialectical process is not experienced as such. So disciple-makers must be prepared to walk with their disciples through the dismantling as much as the re-building of the self in Christ.

At this juncture all three elements of the R-E-D nature may come to bear: the physical presence of another can help the disciple who feels physically uncomfortable with purgation; in relationship with God and his people, truth and safety can be experienced when falsehood and malformation are renounced and truth accepted. As embodied, relational and dialectically formed human beings, "our spiritual disciplines must emerge from our relationship with God if they are to become a means of grace to free us from our misformed self and form us in the image of Christ" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 94)

The scripture reading quadrant

Now that I have addressed the R-E-D nature of scripture reading, I will explore the breadth to which a congregation can engage in scripture reading by looking at varying sizes of scripture portions and varying sizes of participants in the spiritual practice. These two facets can be placed together to form a quadrant in which the four corners have distinct characteristics and advantages. The horizontal axis below represents the size of the group engaging in scripture, from an individual to a large group involving the entire congregation. The vertical axis represents the size of the scripture portion with which the group engages, from a single word or verse to an entire chapter or book.

Each of the four quadrants is labeled by a two letter code, the first representing small (**S**) or large (**L**) on the horizontal axis (the size of the group engaging in the practice) and the second representing the size of scripture portion engaged (**M**etanarrative or **D**etail-context). The larger the portion of scripture engaged, the more encompassing its representation of the overarching metanarrative of scripture. As smaller portions are engaged, the focus is more on the details of the biblical story; however, the wider narrative must inform the interpretation of these details in order to remain true to the author's intent. Therefore, I label this end of the spectrum as "detail-

in-context." Each of the four quadrants can have a particular effect on personhood development, particularly identity formation, and therefore may offer unique contributions to keeping sacrificial love from becoming dehumanizing.

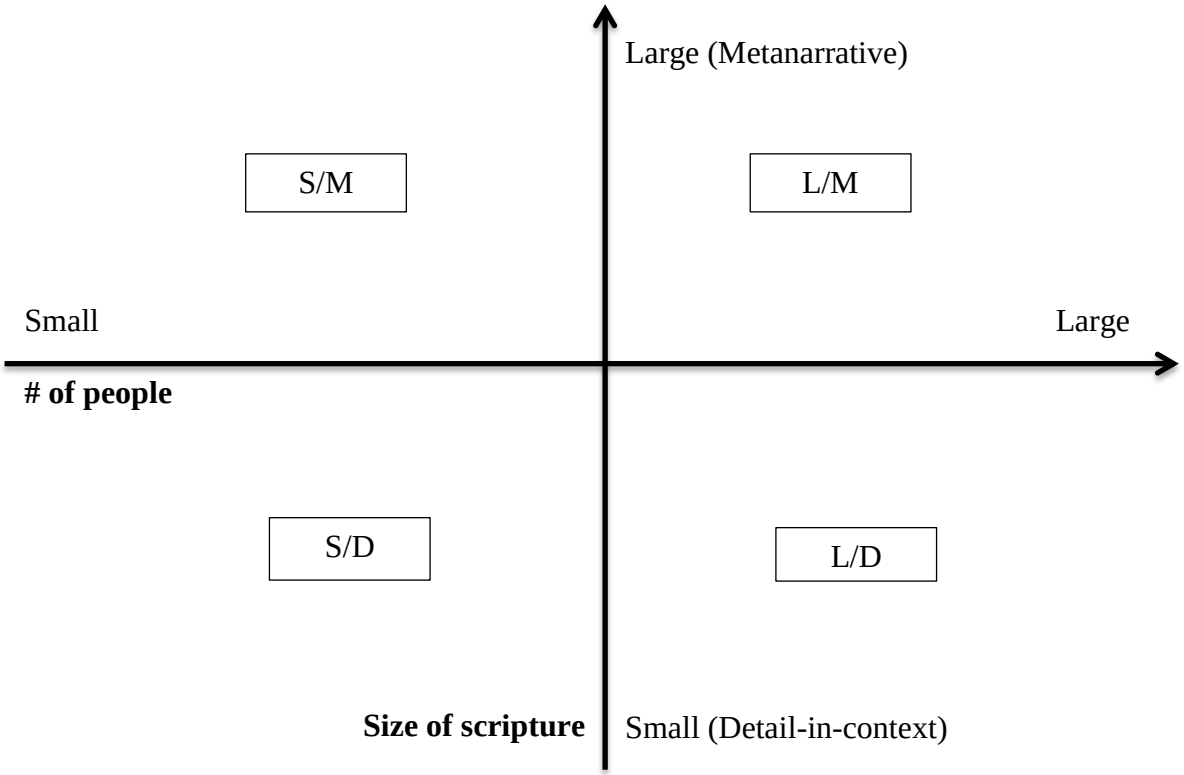

Figure 4. *Differing approaches to scripture engagement*

Scripture's metanarrative. The top half of the diagram, concerning the cosmic metanarrative, may be the most neglected in the local congregation's experience with scripture. Yet for Christian identity formation it is of utmost importance that we understand God's metanarrative and our place in it, and that we also interpret our community within the authoritative understanding of past and future events as revealed in God's Word. So each Christian's life story and every church's congregational story is best understood as "a small part of the drama of God's history" (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 320).

Consciously entering into the divine/human saga is a key element in developing a robust Christian identity. An understanding of the disciple's place within this grand narrative gives them a sense of mission, what Schreiter calls a "sense of direction to which you're moving," (Schreiter, 2016, p. 196). Since stories have a direction – a telos – knowing that you are in the great true cosmic story provides personal and communal direction, purpose, and mission. This mission for the Christian is to love God with all one's being and to love others as one loves the self. This anchoring in God's story plays a crucial part in keeping sacrificial love from becoming dehumanizing because it arises from an increasingly indestructible sense of purpose which recognizes and preserves one's dignity.

Telling scriptural stories that explain the purposes and direction of history forms and transforms personal and communal identity. This was the way the Jews developed the identity of their children – through the narratives of the Old Testament. And the Greeks used myth to form the identities of their children: "Storytelling was the primary tool for moral education in classical Greece" (Kallenberg in N. C. Murphy et al., 1997, p. 14). Rome, too, trained their children to become adult citizens through narrative. By saying "Caesar is Lord," one was claiming to participate in a story about the empire and about civilization that went back for centuries with Rome as the center and the highest good.

Stories are more likely to engage the whole person and form the identity than systematic facts or a list of statements to believe. Facts and statements are important and can make a deep impact on believers, but they do so more powerfully when they are explained and recited within the context of a narrative. The narrative explains how and why these things have come to be and how they have been believed through the ages. The statements and facts make up a narrative to be entered into more than a list to be believed. Murphy and others (1997), commenting on

Alasdair MacIntyre's thought, tell how "each member of any (and all) traditions required lifelong training in order to see rightly just what the given tradition maintained to be the telos of human life" (p. xi). Consistently and continuously telling these stories confirms the identities of the group's members and joins them together within the same narrative, with a communal beginning, middle and end. Kruger (2018) explains that the Christian "rule of faith" – including the virgin birth, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, as well as the coming of the Spirit, forgiveness of sins, and creation of the church – since before the second century served as more than a creed to be acknowledged but a narrative to enter into:

> What is noteworthy about this list [of creedal statements] is that it is not just an abstract collection of doctrinal affirmations, but is, in essence, *a history of redemption*. The rule of faith, as expressed by the second-century fathers, typically runs through these items in the chronological order, beginning with creation and ending with consummation. Thus, this list is less about raw doctrinal truths and more about affirming divine actions in history. It is about what God has done and what he will do through the person of Jesus Christ.… The rule of faith is a retelling of the cosmic story.… The first-century Christians had already begun to articulate their identity in the light of the overall biblical meta-narrative.… From the very beginning Christians expressed their theological worldview not just in related axioms (although at times they did) but primarily in the form of *story*. (Kruger, 2018, pp. 144–145, emph, orig.)

To support this claim Kruger (2018) cites Robert Jenson (2010) who claims it was the rule of faith that maintained "the narrative character of the gospel" (Kruger, 2018, p. 145). Christians "share in a certain ongoing real story – a story whose link with its primitive past is established by

anamnesis or memory, and whose link with its final end is fixed by the anticipation or hope of the sharers of the Way" (McClendon, 2002, p. 330). The church needs to widen her understanding of scriptural reading to include personal and communal identity formation within the cosmic Christ story.

For both individuals and groups, "we interpret our own experience through telling our story" (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 233). So for Christians and churches, adopting an identity which aligns with God's understanding of the significance and purpose of creation will result in a desire to love God and others sacrificially, bringing about spiritual maturity in the power and fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, disciplers might want to keep an eye on the identity formation of those they disciple because "Christian spirituality should be grounded in a healthy regard for personal identity and self-efficacy" (Getahun, 2011, p. 742). Discipleship must be more than gaining facts about God and creation through the scriptures; it is an inherently meaning-making process and meaning-making happens through story-telling. Narrative, then, is a "deeper and more direct form of knowledge than grasping a proposition in an intellectual sense" (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 238).

As a deeply transforming encounter, scripture plays a significant role in developing and transforming the identity-narrative of the believer and the congregation because "life is not man-made. We did not create or invent life, our lives, ourselves. If there is a meaning to our very lives and our very selves, it must be there by nature, not by art; … it must be objective, not subjective" (Kreeft, 2011, p. 168). Our life's meaning and that of the local believing community are an objective reality that must be discovered (not self-invented) because God is the maker of all things and his purpose in making each individual and congregation provides the authoritative meaning and significance for that entity. The metanarrative of scripture explains why and how

all things exist from, by, and for God. Neither the individual nor the congregation is an end in itself or an independent center of meaning. As Sir Francis Bacon wrote, “It is a poor center of a man’s actions, himself” (Bacon, 1612, para. 1).

While the events of a believer’s or community’s history are objectively real, one’s interpretation of them can tell a true or false narrative about them. The level of truth or falsity of the narrative is based on how closely the interpretation reflects the actual meaning that God has placed on the historical events. True maturity and flourishing for Christians can be experienced as they adopt the identity determined by the Creator because all believers “are dependent on God for our self-understanding.… Because we are created, we can only know ourselves most deeply in relationship to our Creator.… Any psychology that makes humanity a closed system, cut off from our cosmic context, is destined to misinterpret our essential nature” (Cooper, 2003, p. 35).

Sacrificial love, when placed within scripture’s metanarrative, does not become the ultimate goal for a Christian, but the way through which the disciple and the congregation glorify and emulate God. In this context, the unsuitability of dehumanization will be more easily recognized and more adamantly resisted as the disciple and congregation define self and life through the lens of the overarching cosmic narrative. When a person believes and trusts what God says in the gospel, they are changing their originally accepted interpretation of all things. So for this reason it can be said that “a conversion must be understood within the framework of a biographical narrative” (Olson in Houston, 2018, pp. 226–227). So when believers, both as individuals and as a community of faith, receive the historical narrative of scripture as true and as part of who they are, “the intrusive, disruptive Word of God penetrates into the very depth of our being. It addresses us at the center of our identity” (Mulholland, 2000, p. 103).

Focusing on details while ignoring the context of the larger story might create a situation in which disciples cannot see the forest for the trees. Because "stories are created with words," there is a danger that we might make "words the point instead of the story" (Dr. Leonard Sweet, doctoral class, Feb. 17, 2020). While word studies and knowledge of the original languages can continue to be a part of a pastor's sermon preparation and knowledge of the scriptures, one need not neglect the circles of context which are part of any scripture passage – the context of the pericope's chapter and book, the biblical author's other literature, and the scriptures as a whole. From the time of the church fathers who insisted "that the narrative of the bible is a continuous, deeply connected story from Genesis through Revelation," Christians have recognized that "continuity and fulfillment characterize the entire story" (C. A. Hall, 1998, p. 191) found in the scriptures. The scriptural metanarrative not only helps articulate the purpose of any particular passage, but it also fills a disciple's and a community's identity needs.

Regardless of the venue, the Christian preacher and teacher can take time to tell the cosmic scope of the story. Details in the scriptural stories are still important. Facts are still vital as necessary building blocks for making meaning; they are just not enough. Christian disciplers must purposefully address the metanarrative with the concept of identity-formation in mind. Each disciple is a character in scripture's one story as well as the story of the worldwide church and the story of the specific local body of believers. Eugene Peterson (1997) describes discipleship as "training us into a full and mature participation in Jesus's story while at the same time preventing us from taking over the story" (quoted in Holt, 2017, p. p.191). Keeping the cosmic saga in mind at all times may prevent the individual or the local church from "taking over the story," that is, interpreting biblical passages with one's self or one's community as the center for interpretation and application. As described in Chapter Two, changing a person's (or

congregation's) center of interpreting life is called "self-denial" by Jesus. Interpreting all things according to the metanarrative revealed in the Christian scriptures is an act of self-denial for a person and a congregation, a foundational authority-exchange affecting the meaning and significance of existence.

The identity-forming purpose for reading the scriptures together as a congregation can be consciously explained to them, and the hearers can be invited to interpret themselves as being a part of the narrative. As the congregation grows in understanding each person as a self-in-community and the local church as a community-in-metanarrative, sacrificial love for others in that community will be safer. In this way, the heart-soil for sacrificial living in the tradition of Jesus and his followers is prepared before God. Anderson (2003) encourages community recitation of scripture, describing the fruits of such a venture as participation in the "bigger picture," accountability to one another, and remembrance of the group's and individual's responsibility and identity (p. 73). Remembering one's responsibility and identity motivates and protects sacrificial love from becoming dehumanizing.

As a history in which the congregation participates, the scripture's metanarrative brings purpose and meaning and defines who they are as a community. Churches are "dynamic systems themselves, formed in the context of the environments in which they are embedded, but also, and most importantly, by the narrative and teaching of Scripture" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 87). The local church is more than a club with which members can choose or not choose to become involved. It is a gathering of called-out ones who believe, worship, and are united in love within a long history and a wide geography, across ethnic and cultural boundaries, of all those believers who came before and will follow after. Community reading of scripture brings out this unity verbally. Those disciples who study the bible on their own rarely speak it or hear it. But "the

eyes and ears affect our souls differently" (Holt, 2017, pp. 44–45), and so discipleship ought to include both private (eyes) and public (ears) reading of the scriptures.

The L/M quadrant. The metanarrative can be part of the large group gathering of a congregation (the L/M quadrant). This might include preaching longer sermon series, perhaps as book studies or following a character's entire life story through weeks or months. Listeners might understand Peter's epistles better, for example, if they had just experienced weeks of learning about his interactions with Jesus throughout the gospels. It may be tempting to neglect the Old Testament because it requires an adept hermeneutic to apply it to the New Testament congregation, but it is an essential part of the metanarrative. The ending of a story is better understood and more satisfying when the beginning is clear.

For churches that follow the liturgical calendar the metanarrative is covered in three years as long as the leaders consistently choose the appropriate readings, though there will be gaps in the story with this process. The point is to connect the dots, to highlight the importance of events within their long historical thread and ultimately to create a thirst for the consummation of what God has been doing in the world. This motivates sacrificial love, which is how God's children participate in the redemption of all things. For non-liturgical churches perhaps local church leadership could ensure that time is dedicated in each service to reading through larger-than-normal scripture sections in order to offer the larger metanarrative. I served in a church that took one full year to go through the entire bible as a congregation with the sermons derived from that week's readings.

Reading large sections of scripture while in the large gathering of the local church unites the individuals in the congregation and builds their identity as a group. Although unusual in most worship settings, reading aloud large sections from the scriptures "in community involves an

ongoing dialectic of formation and information" (N. C. Murphy et al., 1997, p. 33). Congregational reading of the scriptures develops individual and communal identities. We "hear and understand as a body and not as individuals receiving a private message from God" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 87). Hearing the word together is tacitly saying, "This is us. This is what we believe. This is our history. This is what makes us who we are. We welcome you to be a part of this redemptive saga." Communal recitation encourages the communal reception of the scriptures which binds disciples into the faith community. This is a significant reason why Christians gather for worship: "To remember who and whose we are. We recount the stories that … turn us into a community with a common source and vision" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 56).

The S/M quadrant. The identity-forming experience from scripture's metanarrative occurs on the individual as well as the communal level. This is seen in the S/M quadrant, representing a small group of people engaging in the larger narrative of scripture. "Christians recognize three important narratives: their own life stories, the story of the church, and God's story" (N. C. Murphy et al., 1997, p. 42); when all three of these narratives are involved in the believer's identity, the mission to love God and others can produce a healthy desire to live sacrificially. Like McHugh (2015), each member can say, "I want to find my place in the grand story … allowing the big story to rewrite my own story" (p. 97).

This dialectical exchange from previously held narratives to God's narrative for the individual happens best in smaller groups which allow for people to tell their own stories and hear others tell theirs. In the more personalized environment "others help us narrate our own stories by telling us about ourselves" (Strawn & Brown, 2020, p. 126). There are false and true stories about the self, the community, and God which the believer is obligated to distinguish. The church must stand against the current culture's obsession with creating one's own identity and

firmly hold to the scriptural truth that the Christian individual and community adopt God's identity for themselves found in the bible's narrative.

The fellowship of the church is more than potluck dinners and ice cream socials but about living out our stories with others and helping one another interpret them - which *can* happen at dinners and socials as much as other meetings of varying sized groups. Churches need to be communities where personal stories are told safely and understood, for "telling your story makes your implicit experiences explicit and brings them into contact with God and others" (Hall & Hall, 2021, pp. 236–237). The measure of successful discipleship is not how much does the disciple know, but whether the disciple is making himself known to God and fellow believers and whether the disciple is receiving others as they relate their own stories.

Another measure of successful discipleship will be whether the disciple senses belonging to the community's story. This occurs best in a smaller group because in the smaller group, there is room and time for individual sharing in which one person speaks and the others listen and receive them. The physical experience of being received and affirmed and of receiving others as they share themselves – making eye contact and sensing a body posture of reception, for example – engages the deeper parts of a person's self. In a small group the felt message can be "this is the history of our congregation and of God's redemptive actions in the whole world. Your story is now part of ours. You belong. Your participation in the saga and the tribe is important because it is now a part of how we define ourselves and gives meaning to us as a community living in the saga with you."

Because one's personal narrative might misinterpret biographical facts, disciplers must help their disciples correctly interpret their own stories, the congregation's, and the cosmic narrative. Misinterpretation is not about ignorance of the facts; it is an issue of not understanding

the true *meaning* of the facts, not catching the true significance to which the facts are pointing or the true end to which the facts are leading. It is like reading the word "lead" as a noun to describe a heavy gray metal when the author intended it as a verb, spoken with a long "e" to describe being in charge and influencing others. Rightly understanding the word requires a wider context – a sentence – to understand the intention of the author. Just as words can be misread, life stories can be misinterpreted. Self-denial is the process of dialectically renouncing one's misinterpretation of the self and of life and adopting God's interpretation as the authoritative and true one. The true interpretation of life and self will motivate sacrificial love; the community in which this dynamic occurs is part of what protects sacrificial love from becoming abusive. In a small group in which people are listening to one another, interpretations of the self which would remain unspoken in a large gathering can be spoken and examined, affirmed, or encouraged to be re-construed.

When we substitute the true grand narrative which gives meaning and significance to all things in the universe with a lesser incorrect metanarrative, ultimately we will damage our identity. We might then find ourselves believing lies about ourselves, God, or others because a "lack of overarching meaning encourages making things up, lying, to fill the gap in meaning" (Van der Kolk, 2015, p. 233). Increased falsehood in our self-understanding, self-narrative, and self-identity weakens our ability to love God and others well; it opens us up to a possible sacrificial love that dehumanizes. So we must work hard to renounce and adopt dialectically the true metanarrative and help others to do so as well.

Philippe Denis (2011) in his work with traumatized people found that "it is only when the narrators 're-story' their lives and find a new meaning in them that they start in earnest the work of healing" (quoted in West, 2016, pp. 224–225). He is not speaking about changing what

happened in the past; that's impossible. He is speaking of re-interpreting, of correctly interpreting, the facts as they are and always will be. And when we over time truly understand ourselves according to the story God is telling about us, then "the [former] big stories (metanarratives) by which we have historically made sense of ourselves to ourselves no longer command the trust they once did" (Swinton, 2007, p. 16). Disciples can adopt God's understanding of what is happening and has happened to them, rejecting former mistaken ways of understanding themselves, their community, and God. This telling and re-telling can only happen in relation with one another. It will take a certain amount of intimacy with one another such as can be found in smaller groups, and it will require persistent sacrificial love. It will take repetitive acts of sacrificial love on the part of disciplers to help disciples tear down any misinterpretations and build up new God-centered and God-given interpretations of the self, of God and of the world. Sacrificial love makes a way for others to love sacrificially; this is how communities flourish.

Transitioning to a new interpretation of the individual's and community's identity-narrative is an act of self-denial in which we renounce our self-centered and even community-centered understandings and adopt a God-centered perspective: "When we change the frame of reference in which we see an event, we change the meaning of the event. The concrete facts of the situation remain the same, but the meaning alters significantly" (Swinton, 2007, p. 16). A sense of personal significance arises out of telling one's autobiography in relation to God who is restoring all life and relationships to fullness, rightness, and flourishing. Just as in a novel "a character's essence is his relationship to his author, who alone holds the secret of his identity" (Kreeft, 2011, p. 116), so it is for the Christian whose author is God. As Sweet (2020) implores,

"Live an identity based on … the true narrative" (Dr. Leonard Sweet, doctoral class, February 17).

Meditating on details-in-context. On the other end of the spectrum of portion sizes of scripture with which to engage, opposite metanarrative, is the detail-in-context. While the metanarrative of scripture provides an essential element in identity-formation, i.e., the cosmic story in which a disciple and a community find meaning and significance, the details-in-context approach to bible study provides the path by which the disciple and the community live out that identity. The details-in-context are where the teachings of scripture become understandable and applicable for the quotidian experience of the Christian and the community.

Although there are multiple ways to look at the details-in-context of scripture, for the sake of this dissertation, I will focus specifically on meditation as a spiritual practice that forms the self and informs the expression of sacrificial love to others. I understand meditation as a prayerful, cognitive action that incorporates strongly affective experiences and bears fruit in embodied actions. Meditation includes ruminating on a scriptural passage or theme and opening the inner places to be affected by that truth.

To transform the deeper recess of our personhood, "we have to rediscover and deploy the ancient discipline of meditation.… Simply exercising the will alone … doesn't work.… [However,] meditation creates new channels [in the brain]" (Ryan, 2012, p. 114). Science has shown that the mental and physical actions involved in prayer create neural pathways that make up new habits. Additionally, aerobic activity, focused attention exercises, and novel learning experiences all increase neuroplasticity, changing the brain (C. Thompson, 2015, pp. 134–136). However, due to the nature of the human brain, this type of transformation requires consistency over a period of time to have an enduring transformative effect. Deeper spiritual transformation

will require faithful perseverance on the part of the disciple for "on the average, it takes about three years of daily Scripture meditation to bring about enough change in a person's daily thought patterns and behavior to produce statistically superior mental health and happiness" (Paul Meier, 1985, in Saucy 2013, p. 181).

In the monastic tradition meditation required the monk to "practice a thing by thinking of it … to fix it in the memory, to learn it" (LeClercq, 1982, quoted in Hancock, 2011, p. 607). The Puritans, too, considered meditation as not only cognitively memorizing the Scriptures but also "apply[ing] them to one's life" (Hancock, 2011, p. 607). In order to live out the scriptures honestly, God's Word needs to penetrate beyond the mere cognitive into the disciple's deeper emotional and identity-forming processes. Communal meditation on scripture will aid congregations to live out Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001). The "you" in this verse is plural, speaking of how the teachings of Jesus redefine and direct the relationships between members of the believing community as God is in the midst of them. The word of Christ dwelling richly within a group of believers is expressed through the relational actions of teaching, admonishing, singing and heartfelt thankfulness (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Col. 3:16), all being evidence of transformed thinking and feeling as individuals and as a community.

Meditation can be seen perhaps as a dynamic in which disciples both take and receive truth. By "taking truth" I refer to the work of right interpretation of the scripture upon which one is meditating, making sure that one is "rightly handling the word of truth" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, 2 Timothy 2:15) through understanding the wider context; this is the step in which information is gathered. But meditation moves beyond mastering the text and invites the disciple to "allow the text to master you" (Mulholland, 2000, p. 57), remembering that the

disciple and the community are the "object, the word is subject doing the action" (p. 59). In meditation, the disciple moves beyond "taking" truth to "receiving" the truth as a message directly from God to the believer and the community and adopting it into heartfelt practice in new ways; this is transformation. Meditation can involve silent and private musings, "but can also include oral reading, recitation, singing, chanting, journaling, creative interpretation or physical movement" (Hancock, 2011, p. 606). It will almost always involve some form of repetition and engage the imagination of those musing on the scripture.

As a spiritual practice, meditation requires a dedicated time commitment of concentration to make for deeper transformation in personhood and therefore in shaping disciples that can love sacrificially without perpetuating abusive dynamics. For meditative purposes, "a small portion" of scripture (Mulholland, 2000, p. 149), or even a theme is chosen to meditate on. Saint Ignatius, in *The* S*piritual Exercises*, considered meditation to consist of "calling to mind some dogmatic or moral truth, and reflecting on or discussing this truth … so as to move the will and produce amendment" (Ignatius, 1522/1999, "Intro to Meditation", p. 54). For Ignatius, meditation is an engagement with God that transforms the entire person, producing the embodied fruit of good motivations and actions that are like Christ. He included the idea of "discussing" the truth, so he saw it as relational, not only between the disciple and God but also among multiple disciples. This is more than talking about a passage in a small group, for it is *prayer* first and foremost, but it is not less than discussion. It is prayerful discussion, open to hear from God and accept what he says through personal and communal application. Ignatius also includes the expectation of "amendment," what I would call dialectical change, in which old ways of living are renounced as new ways are simultaneously adopted. This can contribute to deep personhood development and maturation.

The ability to pay attention is a skill implemented through and matured by spiritual practices for one's spiritual formation. Curt Thompson (2015) describes attention as the "function that drives the movement of neuroplasticity" (p. 48). In other words, "we become what we pay attention to" (p. 48); the physiology of our brains is changed when we pay attention. The scripture describes it similarly: we become like what we worship (see *English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Psalm 115:4-8, 135:15-18). Deeper transformation involves a conscious devotion to what God is saying and doing in us. Exerting mental, emotional, and psychological effort to understand and receive God's word is a loving way to show devotion to him. Spiritual transformation into the kind of person who loves sacrificially in a healthy way will require the skill of active listening to self, God, and other people. Meditation develops this skill.

The practice of meditative prayerful scripture reading is a practice in paying attention and "this matter of attention is so important for us who live in the wordy world of high-tech telecommunication systems" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 98). We are bombarded by invitations, or perhaps temptations, to our attention. Focusing on one thought for any period of time beyond a minute or so requires a certain giving up of one's desire to be entertained, educated, or engaged. But in setting these distractions aside, the disciple dialectically receives more deeply from God.

In a hurried culture that values work, effort, and accomplishments, meditation is poorly valued. Our age is not unique in belittling time-consuming and seemingly unproductive meditation. When Thomas à Kempis wrote *The Imitation of Christ*, it was to "stress meditation and the inner life" over and against "the outer life of much busyness and occupation" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 148). Throughout the history of the church, discipleship has needed to resist the

world's many distractions and responsibilities which might cause the disciple to neglect the inner life and community relationships.

Receiving the truth from scripture means listening to what the Spirit says through the Word and the community. Listening requires one to be silent. Silence is full of potential spiritually, for "silence, poetically described as 'God's first language', is an indispensable condition for genuine spiritual transformation" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. xviii). We cannot speak and listen at the same time, so silence is integral to listening. Words can be used "to control and manage others," including attempts at manipulating God; we can also "use words constantly to adjust our public image," but "silence puts the stopper on all that self-justification" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 158). Disciples must put aside their agenda, desires, goals, preferences, delusions, and assumptions in order to listen. These are some of the elements of the Christian's life involved in self-denial before God. Self-denial, as a renunciation of self as authoritative interpreter of life and scripture, and as an adoption of God's interpretation of them, is a continual process in the devotional life of a believer. Meditation both requires and builds self-denial in a personhood-developing, community-connecting dynamic with God. It can transform a believer and a community deeply, in the hidden place of the identity, and develop lives which can love sacrificially without being dehumanized.

Transformation is something God does in the interiority of a person, usually with one's conscious participation. Intentionality and mindfulness make for more effective spiritual practices. Scriptural reading is a mutual dynamic between God and the disciple-in-community reading the scriptures: from one perspective, the disciples are doing the mental, emotional and devotional work of interpreting, meditating and applying, while from another perspective God is working within disciples and congregations to form them into the image of Christ.

It is difficult to train oneself to be patient in meditation, “to release our own agenda and wait patiently for God’s purposes to be disclosed” (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 36). The releasing of our own agenda is an act of self-denial, in the sense that the disciple re-prioritizes lesser goals to focus instead on knowing God and being known by him more intimately. It is a self-denying act to let God speak into what he knows are the disciple’s and congregation’s needs. He knows if encouragement, correction, or training in righteousness is needed. Meditation in community can be a strong guard against twisting scripture to one’s own agenda, against using scripture as a blunt instrument upon another person, and against remaining on certain favorite themes or passages. As disciples engage in meditation as a spiritual practice, they will, by nature of the continual concentration, openness, and self-denial involved, form a second nature in Christ over a period of time. Meditative prayer is training in patience, a fruit of abiding in Christ and in the Spirit.

To sum up, scripture reading can be a powerful spiritual practice that matures personhood by anchoring identity in the Christ metanarrative. This identity narrative then provides motivation, context, and direction for sacrificial love that prevents dehumanization and allows the community to flourish. This is most effective when scripture is approached not as a tool but as the environment in which and through which a disciple and congregation meet God, experience his love and forgiveness, and take on his redemptive mission in the world. Scripture reading is also more deeply effective when gaining information leads to consciously receiving transformation.

There are a variety of ways to engage in scripture reading as a spiritual practice. Taking in large sections at a time allows for the metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation to shape a disciple’s and congregation’s place in the cosmic story, providing

direction and significance. Smaller sections can be studied in context, which can become more deeply transformative when time is spent meditating on the meaning and application. Being open to the metanarrative and to specific sections can occur as an individual, as a small group, and as a larger congregation; each context has its place in effecting personal and communal transformation.

Chapter Seven: Prayer in Personhood Development and Sacrificial Love: *Examen*

According to the Pew Research Center (2021), prayer among U.S. adults is decreasing. From 2007 to 2021, the percentage praying daily dropped from 58% to 45%. While the percentage praying weekly or monthly (22%) stayed the same, more U.S. adults in 2021 say that they pray seldom or never than in 2007, from 18% to 32% (G. Smith, 2021). Since communication through prayer is crucial to intimacy with God, and therefore to anchoring one's identity in Christ, and to keeping sacrificial love from becoming abusive, congregations have room to improve prayer as a spiritual practice among their members.

I open this chapter with some warnings from Lauren Winner concerning how our approach to prayer may not be freeing us from ungodly and unhealthy patterns. I then consider the R-E-D nature of prayer in order to focus on how the *examen* as a specific form of prayer can better shape mature personhood that loves sacrificially without perpetuating dehumanizing dynamics. Because the intimacy of prayer opens individuals and communities to certain damaging abuses, in the next two chapters I look at how congregations can create a culture that becomes a healthy context for self-exploration, self-evaluation, confession, and restoration.

Some warnings about prayer

Prayer, like other spiritual practices, in itself does not guarantee spiritual maturity. It is not a "method or program but a way of life, an ongoing 'practice.' It is a way of life that is, before all else, life *coram deo,* before God" (Buschart, 2011, p. 320). When prayer becomes merely a list of requests, or a means to something else – even personal spiritual growth, or a necessary chore – it becomes less effective at developing the disciple's personhood. Lauren Winner (2018) warns us to engage in petitionary prayer warily, "knowing its potential for distortion" (p. 61). She offers as an example diaries from the Civil War era in which young

Southern belles ask God to give them "better feelings" about their slaves (p. 61ff). In these cases, "prayer was put in the service of slavery" (p. 74) as if it were "a neutral technology, usable in the service of anything" (p. 79). If it is possible for Christian slave owners to overlook the brutality and injustice of American slavery within their prayer life, then it is possible that contemporary Christians also have moral blind spots in the midst of their prayers. Prayer, if it is to be a truly transforming spiritual practice, will become more than a mere recitation of things needed or wanted from God. It is not to be a means of communicating to others instead of God, nor a means to keep subordinates such as slaves or children in their place (Winner, 2018, p. 64 ff.).

Repentance and confession might help to keep prayer from becoming manipulative, but even these attitudes can be tainted by wrong priorities and a lack of self-awareness. Therefore, Winner (2018) advises that "part of what we ought to bewail in confession is our inability to discern what is good for us; part of what we ought to bewail is the state of affairs whereby what we think we want is often inflected with opposition to what God wants for us" (p. 93). Like prayer in general, confession in particular can still be blinded by prejudices and emotional guardedness, all the while appearing genuine. As Winner (2018) says, "Perhaps confession – which, among other things, is diagnostic – should be the frame of all prayer … but confession is hardly immune from deformation" (p. 91).

Prayer is R-E-D

Keeping in mind the R-E-D nature of prayer as a spiritual practice can undercut the power of self-deception, help develop mature personhood in disciples, and motivate them to love sacrificially without abusive dynamics. Prayer is relational, of course, for it concerns one's conversation with God. It is a "dynamic, transformative, dialogical relationship between humans and the triune God" (Nienkirchen, 2011, p. 166). But while prayer is sometimes considered a

private matter – as when Jesus encourages his disciples to "go into their room and shut the door" in Matthew 6:6 (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001) – in the same passage Jesus teaches his disciples to pray as a community by addressing God as *our* Father (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Matthew 6:9). Community, when it is characterized by safe intimate relationships, is a powerful way to keep self-awareness honest. Some may be able to fool themselves, but a frank and forthright friend or church leader can gently approach what may appear as misplaced priorities or an unrealistic view of the self and of life. Perhaps this dynamic is why Strawn and Brown (2020) mention several communal contexts for transformative prayer, including corporate prayer in the worship service and small group prayer, and why they specifically pinpoint being prayed for as an important element of the relational nature of prayer as a spiritual practice (p. 90).

Prayer is also very much an embodied spiritual practice. This is why spiritual directors and church leaders will often encourage a retreat, a time and place specifically set aside for the disciple to remove herself physically from the normal places and schedules of daily living. In the introduction to his work, *The Spiritual Exercises,* Ignatius (1491-1556) lists advantages to solitude, including physical separation for the sake of prayer in order to limit the distractions from friends, relations, and worldly affairs. This allows disciples to more easily fix their thoughts on service to God (Ignatius, 1999, "Introduction," p. 52-53). He recognizes the connection between the inner life and the embodied dynamic of being human. It can be noted as well that Ignatius's famous work is written for the context of a spiritual retreat accomplished under the guidance of a spiritual director in which the relationship between the two people is as essential as between the disciple and God. In the retreat, both physical separation and the physical presence of a like-minded other are aids to prayer.

Being with another person necessarily involves the physical presence of both, with the attending effects a body has on another body. The physicality of another can make forgiveness, mercy, joy and other spiritual experiences feel "more real" due to the interpersonal neurobiology involved, as discussed on pg. 31 above, regarding personhood development being embodied . Nienkirchen (2011) believes this embodiedness of spirituality is recognized still today, not just in Ignatius' time, describing the "current widespread appreciation of prayer as a total experience, engaging body, mind and spirit" (p. 171). So part of the embodiedness of prayer is seen when prayer involves more than one person and their embodiedness affects one another.

The embodiedness of human beings also affects prayer done alone, in the physical posture of the disciple as part of expressing themselves to God. Ignatius explains that he assumes a posture "most suitable to the end I propose to myself, sometimes with my face bowed to the earth, sometimes standing, sometimes sitting" (Ignatius, 1999, "Intro to Meditation, Add. Recommendations," p. 60). The positioning of your body aims the inner life in a specific direction – praise, waiting to receive, or humbling the self, for example – so care can be taken to ensure one's prayer posture aligns with and aids the attitude one is seeking. Posture in prayer may be of varying importance across cultures and times. When I was attending a prayer meeting in Ukraine in the late 1990s, one Ukrainian was upset that the Americans were leaning against the wall during prayer instead of standing upright which was the Ukrainian Christian default posture at the time; it was, for him, a sign of disrespect.

In addition to being relational and embodied, prayer is of a dialectical nature, just as personhood development is. In prayer, disciples repent of sinful actions and tendencies and receive grace and comfort, a dialectical dynamic of tearing down and rebuilding in which both actions encourage and include the other. Gordon Smith (2011) considers repentance and

confession as “vital elements of a Christian spirituality – as part of the liturgy and worship of the church and of personal prayer” (p. 661). In this quote he links repentance and confession to the large gathering of the church together; it is not merely a private exercise. Concerning dialecticism, Smith (2011) considers confession as highlighting “the wonder of the goodness and mercy of God” (p. 662). So the tearing down of the self-centered and self-protective attitudes and actions simultaneously involves the experience of mercy and acceptance of forgiveness. Just as in self-denial, prayer dialectically involves both renunciation and adoption.

In a context that values accomplishment and unceasing work, prayer can become a list of things to ask for and its effectiveness can become measured by whether one receives what is asked for. Even disciples who have moved beyond merely requesting things from God, who have added adoration, confession of sins, and thanksgiving to their prayer experience, can still treat these additional elements as a checklist to go through. When one moves into prayer as being in the presence of God, self-denial is simultaneously being learned and being practiced. While we are to draw near to the throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and find help in our needs (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Hebrews 4:16), many times our most important need and the deepest grace is merely being in the presence of our heavenly Father. God is relational; he made us for intimacy, a dynamic that often places knowing the other in higher regard than expressing the self. In this kind of prayer, all efforts are dedicated to seeing God in truth and accepting him without resistance. This desire to receive and understand the other is weakened if one continues to hold any other agenda. The dialectical nature of this spiritual practice involves renouncing other agendas as a means of receiving God’s agenda, which is his Presence known and loved in the context of the disciple also being known and loved. When one habitually listens for and to God, the waiting and hearing create a submissive attitude which is

built into one's character and then expressed in one's relationships with other people. Self-denial before God flowers into sacrificial love for others.

Whether a Christian's prayer is for repentance, praise, supplication, or some other purpose, being with God includes seeking his will over one's own, a dialectical dynamic. The resulting transformation of the disciple's personhood, and of the disciple's relationship with God and with God's people, encourages sacrificial living. Having been shown mercy and acceptance, the disciple, from a stabilized place of secure identity, shows mercy and accepts others. Giving mercy in this way is not abusive; it leads to a flourishing community which encourages personal growth for all in the congregation.

Prayer as *Examen*

While there are many manifestations of prayer in the disciple's life, including adoration, thanksgiving, and supplication, this chapter will focus specifically on *examen*, particularly as it is demonstrated by Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*, as a context for personhood development and loving sacrificially without perpetuating abusive dynamics. *Examen* involves both self-knowledge and self-evaluation. Self-knowledge is the non-judgmental exploration of one's desires, feelings, thoughts, judgments, and attitudes which drive one's actions. Self-evaluation is the second step of *examen*; it involves evaluating what one has discovered in the first step. Where one's inner and outer life is found not to be aligned with God's desires for being and relating, confession makes for cleansing and a re-alignment of thoughts, feelings, and actions. This realignment brings increasing integrity to one's identity, resulting in living more consistently in agreement with how one wants to be in Christ. This ever-increasingly stable and integrated identity allows for healthy sacrificial love without abusive dynamics.

In this schema there is a direct connection between *examen*, practiced within a safe relationship with God and an accepting relationship with a local congregation, and an anchored identity from which healthy sacrificial love arises. The success of a local church may not be best measured by attendance or how much money is given or baptisms per se, but in how deeply disciples are being transformed into sacrificial lovers of God and others. Confessional prayer habits can make disciples that are better equipped spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically to love sacrificially without succumbing to abusive relational patterns. This chapter seeks to explain the first step in the process of prayerful *examen*, self-knowledge. The next chapter will cover the second step of *examen*. The process described above is illustrated here:

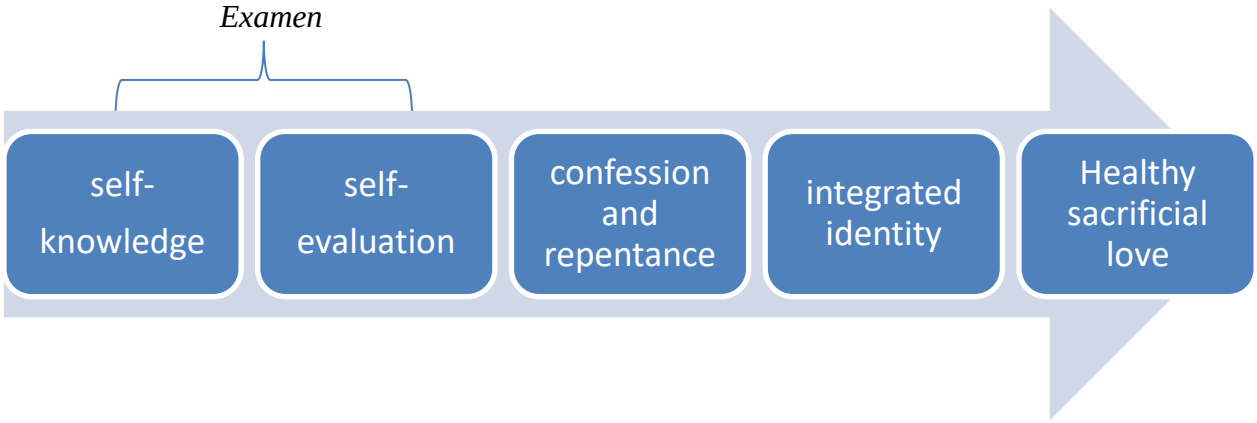

Figure 5. *The flow from examen to healthy sacrificial love*

E. L. Johnson (2017) offers a similar progression which he describes as the process through which the believer "participates in Christ's crucifixion" (p. 506) in order to deal with negative emotions. His steps include negative emotion awareness, negative emotion evaluation, verbal expression from the heart (lament and confession), "repositioning oneself with respect to the old and the new" (p. 511) which includes repentance, and then ends with "a transformational emotion shift" (p. 513). Especially appropriate to our discussion is his separation of awareness

from evaluation and his inclusion of confession and re-alignment to Christ's ideal. While his discussion is in the context of addressing negative emotions in light of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, mine seeks to focus on how identity transformation will lead to adopting practical and embodied sacrificial loving as the mission for Christians. The similarity in the processes gives strong validation to my proposal.

The opening engagement encouraged by Ignatius in the *examen* is to reflect on the purpose of humankind. This is an activity that seeks to settle one's identity narrative in the cosmic metanarrative before beginning the sometimes rigorous process of discovering the self in dialogue with God. Specifically, Ignatius guides disciples to meditate on the facts that they come from God, belong to God, and are destined for God. The hoped for effect is humility, admiration, gratitude, adoration, regret, submission, sorrow for the past, contempt for all created things in comparison to God, and an increasing love for God (Ignatius, "First Part, First Week," pp. 72-84). This is the principle or foundation from which the rest of the spiritual exercises in his work flow:

> In his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius urged that all be taught the Examen, a daily prayerful reflection on our responses to the events of the day. The purpose of this reflection was to see God's presence and to discern God's direction for us. Ignatius believed that the key to a healthy spirituality is to find God in all things and to work constantly to cooperate with God's will.
>
> Our responses to daily events fall into two categories: our consolations (what connects us with God, others, and ourselves) and desolations (what disconnects us). Ignatius believed that God would speak to us through these two feelings. (The Upper Room, n.d.)

R-E-D Examen

Examen, like prayer in general, will have deeper results when its R-E-D nature guides the practice. Even private self-examination is relational, done in the presence of and with help from God; it is never a purely individualized activity. At times self-examination might be best served in the context of safe relationships with other human beings, for although "Christian self-examination is done *before God* and with reference to Christ.… [It] is also necessarily social" (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 443). So whether self-examination is private or public, practiced alone or in groups of varying sizes, because human personhood is inherently relational – "because individual humans are fundamentally co-beings" (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 444) – prayerful self-examination will be relational, as well as embodied and dialectical.

As embodied humans, listening to our physical bodies is an important element in listening to ourselves; "body (autonomic) awareness is an integral part of self-awareness" (Dana, 2018, p. 81). Because we are an incarnated unity, knowing who we are is not merely a cognitive or emotional task; it is also physical because "our sense of agency, how much we feel in control, is defined by our relationship with our bodies and its rhythms" (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 333). Therefore, paying attention to one's physical sensations can be a step toward unlocking one's core beliefs which may otherwise remain hidden.

For example, in a time of anxiety one might experience an upset stomach, clenched teeth, tightness in the chest, increased pulse, shallow breathing, and sweating. Van der Kolk (2015) goes so far as to make a distinction between what he calls the physical and emotional brain: "In contrast with the rational brain, which expresses itself in thoughts, the emotional brain manifests itself in physical reactions" (p. 206). While there are various reasons a person might not know they are anxious, recognition of the physiological symptoms of anxiety can lead to awareness

that anxiety exists underneath one's conscious awareness of it. It is possible to feel a certain way and not be aware of it until one recognizes the body's physical responses in the moment because "memories are so deeply embodied that they interact with our current emotions or body postures" (Strawn and Brown, 2020, p.46). The next step after becoming aware of one's feelings is to label those emotions accurately and then to discover the cognitive-emotional dynamics generating them. This transformational level of metathinking may require shaping one's environment to allow for it; this is one purpose of spiritual practices. In this regard "the psychological literature on mindfulness notes that the essential elements necessary to cultivate awareness are silence and solitude" (Hall & Hall, 2021, p. 249). These are physical contexts for the embodied Christian to practice prayer. Both silence and solitude require some sort of removal from normal physical input. Paul Tournier (1984), a Swiss Christian counselor and doctor, would agree that self-examination needs silence and time in order to discover "underlying motives" (Tournier, 1984, in Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 162).

An exception to the common use of solitude in self-discovery would include any survivors of trauma who might require a therapist or friend to help them with the exploration. For some trauma survivors, recognizing their own body and its responses is very difficult without help from a gentle, perceptive, and safe partner. This partner can be sensitive to the needs and current tolerance levels of the one they are helping, wisely sensing when probing is helpful or hindering progress. The effective partner recognizes the pattern and pacing of growth and patiently works within them, cutting short any particular episode of self-examination if it is becoming too unsettling. Likewise, in a professional counseling environment, "in turning toward their autonomic experience the therapist and client together listen openheartedly and open-mindedly to the physiological underpinnings of their psychological stories" (Dana, 2018, p. 79).

Herman (2015) also recognizes the important role the therapist can play in recovery from trauma, particularly in the area of self-knowledge and other psychological faculties: “The therapist’s role is both intellectual and relational, fostering both insight and empathic connection” (Herman, 1992, p. 135). For some, self-knowledge as a relational dynamic requires other physical bodies being present and other people’s insight speaking into the process, while for others the relational dynamic between them and God alone is effective enough.

The dialectical nature of prayer is expressed most clearly when *examen* is followed by confession. Though tearing down and reconstructing are distinct processes, they are interdependent. This will be explored more in depth in the next chapter. Yet it is important for the disciple to expect the building up as much as the tearing down, to expect the merciful acceptance and forgiveness as much as the declaration of fault. E.L. Johnson (2007) warns of a negative over-examination of the self, referring to it as “ruminative self-consciousness” or “self-preoccupation” (p.441). It can lead to “increased negative effect” and a hampering of “their ability to listen to and empathize with others” (E. L. Johnson, 2007, pp. 441–442). This is the opposite result of the one desired, which is sacrificial love. While the dynamic of self-examination is assuredly complex, these negative results may in part be the effect of a one-sided process instead of a dialectical one. For the Christian, the naming of sin or error is meant to involve the claiming of mercy and forgiveness by faith in Christ’s sacrifice as exemplified in Psalm 32:2 (*English Standard version Bible*, 2001): “Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” This psalm juxtaposes the honest transparency of showing the self to God (“no deceit”) with the forgiveness it engenders (“blessed,” “counts no iniquity”). But self-examination outside the context of God’s mercy and forgiveness in Christ can have the opposite result of what the spiritual practice was developed to

attain, so remembering that the dynamic is supposed to dialectically involve forgiveness and cleansing can be important in preventing this negative outcome.

Examen and Self-knowledge

With this overarching relationship as a constant context in the dynamic of *examen*, the first step is to discover what is truly inside the self. Self-knowledge, also referred to as self-awareness, is found through the skill of listening to the self, a dynamic termed "introspection" or "self-discovery." This dynamic involves turning the attention inward with the purpose of better understanding what one is feeling and believing without making any moral judgments on what is discovered. The practice seeks to reveal hidden internal personhood dynamics that may be influencing behavior and relationships with God and others. The Christian scriptures consider self-knowledge to be crucial to spiritual formation into the image of Christ. Godly wisdom teaches to "keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Knowing the heart's condition and orientation is necessary in order to guard it. Guarding the heart will also require understanding what is good and bad for the heart, but that does not come into play until the second step of *examen*. In the psalm attributed to King David in which he confesses his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband he says, "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Psalm 51:6). The opposite of truth in the inward being would be blame-shifting or self-justification, in essence an attempt to hide from God.

Historically, the two steps of *examen* are not often discussed separately. However, I believe that jumping into self-evaluation, that is self-interpretation or "self-appraisal" (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 448), before a more complete self-discovery is accomplished hinders the honesty, transparency, and depth of the dynamic. Before self-evaluation, it will be important to

keep judgment out of the dynamic of self-discovery; otherwise guilt and fear may hinder the process. M. J. Thompson (2015) encourages an attitude of openness to evaluating the self that begins without judgment so that a free and accurate measurement can be taken. In order to prevent shame from shutting down the process and causing one to hide from the truth and from God, self-discovery can be done with the understanding that there is "no need to justify, explain, blame, judge or excuse" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 98).

Deeper self-knowledge can lead to a more deeply mature personhood and increasingly non-abusive sacrificial love. Even though the second stage of *examen*, self-examination in the sense of judging one's own moral rightness, is not generally found in secular psychology (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 440), for the Christian, self-knowledge is most fruitful for personhood development when it is followed by self-appraisal. The evaluation of the self in juxtaposition to God's intention for human flourishing is most effective when performed with an attitude of humility and honesty in the context of relational acceptance by God and God's people. Relational acceptance provides the necessary context for honesty, the best friend of discovering the truth about the self, for "self-examination has two prerequisites: self-awareness and transparency" (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 439).

The writers of the New Testament epistles called on their readers to "examine themselves" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, 2 Corinthians 13:5). This is *examen* in both its discovery and evaluation stages, for it involves "whether you are in the faith" (v.5) and concerns sinful habits (v.2). When thinking of self-evaluation, it may be helpful for the Christian to remember that the motive of evaluation is correction, not judgment. The purpose of evaluation is for the community to experience closer communion by eliminating those elements in the self that may be causing distance; the purpose is not to drive the sinner to experience deeper

rejection. Since “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Romans 8:1), the Christian can safely explore even the darker elements of his personality without fear. The Christian experiences God’s “perfect love” which “casts out fear” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, 1 John 4:18) and can look forward to “the day of judgment” with “confidence” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, 1 John 4:17).

Assurance in knowing God and being known by him – “that you may know you have eternal life” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, 1 John 5:13) – is also a self-reflective task requiring self-knowledge. So scripture encourages *examen,* inviting the believer to experience affirmation in those areas which are aligned with God and to accept correction where transformation is needed. Christian self-examination is a metaprocess that examines the examination process even while examining the self; the very dynamic of examination will be transformed by the Spirit and the Word over time. It will include an “awareness of one’s interpretations of one’s past and present” (E. L. Johnson, 2007, p. 453), that is, evaluating one’s identity-narrative in light of what one discovers about the self. As the Christian’s identity-narrative is transformed, self-examination will also mature as a spiritual practice.

Many throughout history have recognized the importance of self-knowledge for spiritual formation. Pope Gregory I (540-604) prescribed “taking rest from the pressures of the world so as to perceive in a lively way inward matters” (quoted by Olson in Houston, 2018, p. 235). Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), in his devotional masterpiece *The Imitation of Christ*, saw “knowledge of the self” as well as “denial of the self” as integral to spiritual transformation (Holt, 2017, p. 105). This seems to mirror my two-step understanding of *examen*. Bill Wilson (1895-1971), the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, lists “make a searching and fearless moral

inventory of ourselves" as the fourth of twelve steps toward victory over addiction (see Holt, 2017, p. 211). Andre Louf (2007), a modern Cistercian monk, calls believers to "listen attentively and vigilantly to the heart" (quoted in Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 32).

When one seeks honesty before God, forgiveness and reconciliation can be experienced alongside the acceptance and approval which God gives through Christ. Self-examination can be seen as an "exercise in surrender to God and discernment of God's leading" (Holt, 2017, p. 133). In this way it becomes a means of deepening self-denial before God, a dialectical step of renouncing old and adopting new perspectives on the self. Self-knowledge plays a part in anchoring the identity's narrative and makes for a more robust personal agency which keeps sacrificial love from perpetuating dehumanization. Au and Au (1995) list self-knowledge – what they call "self-appropriation" or "knowing what's going on inside" – as the first step in spiritual transformation (p. 3). I, too, place it first in the above transformational schema.

All of this is deeply related to healthy sacrificial love because, as shown in the previous chapters, in order for sacrificial love to resist abusive dynamics it must arise out of sure and right motives. If sacrifices are made in a relationship in order to avoid conflict or prevent distress, the underlying, and perhaps unrecognized, fear might outweigh right reason or knowledge of the higher good and might accept abusive dynamics. But when the motivations for relational sacrifices arise from an identity-narrative anchored in the story of God's affirmation and acceptance, and the attendant dignity and significance given by God, abusive dynamics will more likely be resisted and confronted for the good of all the people in the relationship. Knowing one's motivations, then, through self-discovery lays a firm foundation for healthy sacrificial love.

Keeping sacrificial love from becoming dehumanizing requires a growing self-awareness that interprets one's inner life and uses language to describe it accurately to others. The ability to see into one's own emotions, deep-seated beliefs, and ways of thinking is also crucial for intimacy and communal flourishing because "only the self-possessed, self-conscious, and self-reflexive being is able to make of himself or herself a gift to the other" (Wallenfang, 2017, p. 90). While the emotional part of the brain can be activated without the cognitive area being aware of it, mature human beings can learn to recognize and evaluate their emotions. In fact, "the only way we can consciously access the emotional brain is through self-awareness, i.e. by activating the medial prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that notices what is going on inside us and thus allows us to feel what we're feeling" (Van der Kolk, 2015, p. 206). Van der Kolk (2015) says, "[free] agency starts with … interoception: … the greater our awareness, the greater our potential to control our lives … If you have a comfortable connection with your inner sensations – if you can trust them to give you accurate information – you will feel in charge of your body, your feelings, and your self" (pp. 97-98). This whole-person awareness described by Van der Kolk can prevent sacrificial love from perpetuating abusive dynamics for it forms an agency that is increasingly influenced by conscious and chosen motivations as well as increasingly free from unconscious ones.

Purposeful attention to one's inner dynamics through the spiritual practices of scripture reading and examining prayer can reveal previously hidden motivations. Once revealed, motivations and other inner dynamics can be evaluated, and then rejected or encouraged; "When we notice our autonomic experience, we have the chance to engage with it, not simply be engaged by it" (Dana, 2018, p. 100). In this way, a person becomes more in charge of their attitudes and choices and less manipulated by mysterious drives. Disciples can then choose to

love sacrificially from their identity-narrative within the Christ metanarrative. Purposeful agency, as opposed to being driven by unevaluated motives is necessary to keep sacrificial love from becoming abusive. This dynamic, illustrated below, builds psycho-emotional-spiritual strength and stability within disciples. They can choose at any time to continue sacrificing out of Spirit-grown love for others, or wisely choose to display that love in another way appropriate to the situation; their agency is freed from hidden and un-evaluated motives.

Hindrances to *examen*

E. L. Johnson (2007) lists three hindrances to healthy self-examination: self-deception (p. 453), affect phobia, (p. 452) and alexithymia (p. 452), which is the inability to sense or name one's own emotional state (see also van der Kolk, 2015, pp. 100-101). Concerning self-deception, one must consider that "man in his human aspects is an unfathomable secret to himself – and to his fellow man" (Fromm, 2013, p. 54). There will be a temptation to follow one's pre-existing biases towards oneself, whether they lean toward pride or self-abasement without realizing one is doing so. A safe community of perceptive friends can be a good help in working one's way out of self-deception, especially in the church which is made up of people with different perspectives, gifts, and backgrounds and differing experiences with the Spirit and differing levels of wisdom. Paul uses the metaphor of a body to describe this in 1 Corinthians 12.

Affect phobia is the fear of emotions. This can arise out of trauma or the culture of one's family of origin. Sometimes emotions can feel so intense or seem so uncontrollable, that it becomes safer to shut them down. Persistently ignoring one's emotions can greatly damage one's relationships as well as one's personhood development to the point that knowing or naming one's emotions becomes impossible. Since non-abusive sacrificial love needs to arise from a mature personhood and stable identity, affect phobia will deeply hinder its expression. E. L.

Johnson (2007) considers the fear of emotions to be “ubiquitous” in our time and suggests that working through it will require the help of other people (p. 452).

Neither the disciple nor the believing community need be afraid of emotions, even difficult ones which might arise through the experience of *examen* in prayer. Masters (2010) calls the efforts to unearth hidden beliefs and feelings “shadow work” (p.47). He counsels against both putting too much and too little weight on emotions: “Authentic shadow work does not allow cognition or spiritual realization to override, repress, or trivialize emotion (nor does it allow us to get lost in emotion or to devalue cognition)” (Masters, p. 48). When *examen* is experienced within a safe, gentle, and empathic community, unwanted or frightening emotions can be felt, faced, labeled, and carried together.

Alexithymia is another possible hindrance to personal maturity, connecting, and sacrificial love. Van der Kolk (2015) relates the results of a study of Holocaust survivors who had shut down their feelings so often and for so long that they no longer had the ability to recognize, label, and relate their inner workings to themselves or others. Many were “professionally successful, but their intimate relationships were bleak and distant” (p. 101). The consistent suppression of feelings made it possible to focus on work responsibilities but it made them unable to relate to people. This can become increasingly serious: “One step further down … is depersonalization – losing your sense of self” (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 101). Alexithymia may have a genetic predisposition, and early repetitive trauma is a strong contributor to becoming unable to feel or recognize one’s emotions (Davis, 2023). Engaging in regular *examen* with an eye to its R-E-D nature over time may help wear down the barriers brought by alexithymia. While completely eliminating alexithymia is rare, it can be overcome to the point that intimacy in relationships can become deeper (Davis, 2023).

As one begins to explore *examen* as a facet of the spiritual practice of prayer, resistance to the process is not unusual. Some will hide from self-exposure by taking on a more cognitive approach to spirituality and religion, for human beings can "unknowingly live out this resistance to being known … in our religious practice, demonstrated by our obsession with knowing and believing the right things about God…. This imbalanced way of being is often a defense against our feelings of insecurity and shame" (C. Thompson, 2010, p. 22). Shame is a common cause of resistance to being exposed. Congregational leaders can seek to create a cultural environment within their church that diminishes the threats to intimacy with God and one another. Knowing God's mercy and growing to trust in him is more easily developed by living in a merciful and loving congregation, opening the disciple to deeper self-denial and to healthier sacrificial love.

Examen and non-judgmentalism

A key element to a healthy congregational environment is non-judgmentalism, what Ignatius calls "indifference" in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Non-judgmentalism is not a flippant disregard of sin, but rather an attitude which expresses that doing wrong, being wounded, or still immature does not break the relational bond of love with God or between brothers and sisters in Christ. Non-judgmentalism holds back on evaluating and on condemnation for the sake of self-discovery. Non-judgmentalism believes that a person's identity is more than one's mistakes, wounds, sins, and weaknesses. This is not a resignation to failure, but the context for hope in God's love, mercy, and power to transform. This kind of relational indifference to sin allows disciples to dig more deeply and truthfully into motivations, attitudes, and actions. If a person can say, "I am still precious and important even though I do wrong sometimes," then one has a growing identity-safety which can increasingly engage boldly in a search for self-knowledge. Dana (2018) calls this "self-compassion" and "a place of befriending" the self (p. 43). Self-

awareness, then, as a first step in spiritual transformation must unafraid of what might be found, what Dana (2018) describes as “curiosity” (p. 83).

Non-judgmentalism is crucial when shame throws up defenses against deeper self-knowledge. Shame, guilt, and fear seek to hide, deflect, or mis-interpret the truth. In fact, “if we are not attending to what we are feeling, it will be easy for [shame] to have its way with us without our even knowing it” (C. Thompson, 2015, p. 51). Here Thompson is speaking of hidden motives which drive decisions that prevent intimacy and healthy relationships. On the other hand, healthy sacrificial love arises best from evaluated motives influenced by one’s conscious knowledge of wisdom, truth, and goodness. Sacrificing for others out of a fear of rejection, or desperation to maintain the relationship, or a manipulation for affection is ultimately abusive and can cause the sacrificial behavior to become excessive to a dehumanizing degree. In the above quote, Curt Thompson (2015) links lack of self-knowledge and unexplored motivations to unhealthy relational dynamics. Conversely, increased self-knowledge can bring clarity to one’s identity-narrative and therefore open the way for realigning those places in one’s narrative not already agreeing with scripture’s metanarrative.

Before going more deeply into discussing shame, a caveat may be important here. Sometimes shame is not the issue blocking self-knowledge, but rather the absence of shame. Shamelessness is a twisted self-reckoning that excuses oneself from the truth of the harm caused by one’s lack of love for God and others; it blinds one’s understanding of the self in relation to others. In shamelessness, there can be a resistance to deeper self-exploration because the practice will seem unnecessary. If there is an assumption of innocence, deep exploration will be hindered. In these cases, non-judgmentalism may be able to free counselors to label any shamelessness or

callousness being demonstrated by the counselee as hurtful and sinful during the self-exploration stage of *examen*.

Like shamelessness, but in an opposite direction, shame negatively affects how a person understands themselves, God, others, and sacrificial love. Churches may unintentionally create a culture that creates a deep abiding sense of shame in its disciples. The danger of shame is that it creates injurious "interpersonal neuro-biological effects" and "bends and twists our narratives into painful story lines" (C. Thompson, 2015, p. 10). This is a direct attack on relationships and personal identity. Shame is deeper than guilt, for while guilt interprets an action as wrong, shame interprets the self as wrong. Defending against a shame-producing environment will require more than a one-time sermon series; for "it seems that virtually every generation has to go about the process of discovering shame again for the first time" (C. Thompson, 2015, p. 11). Understanding the effects that shame and guilt have on human physiology and psychology, especially in regards to identity and agency, can help direct Christian disciplers into how to lead disciples into wholeness through anchored identities, healthy sacrificial love, and flourishing communities.

Shame is experienced mostly as an emotion, but the emotion arises from an underlying interpreting narrative which, if it were given a voice, might tell a story something like "I am not enough; there is something wrong with me; I am bad" or "I don't matter" (C. Thompson, 2015, p. 24). There are many grounds on which to feel shame depending on the culture in which one finds oneself. There might be "condemnation of heart for who we are, … that we are a man or a woman or that we have a certain kind of body [or] because of the way we dress.… It is an essential feature of a fallen world that it is filled with condemnation" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 249). And while many of the *reasons* for shame seem to be external to the person, shame itself

attacks the identity by telling the self-narrative in a negative and condemning light. A re-forming of the identity in Christ heals shame.

Shame's dynamic, because it is so attached to identity, must be understood as more than facts that one believes about the self. Just as identity is a story, shame is a story that places a severely negative judgment on one's meaning and direction. As identity-narrative it is difficult to uproot because it underlies so much of one's thoughts, emotions and reactions. It is more than a single thought to be corrected; shame makes one feel like one's entire telos is insignificant. Ultimately, "shame's power lies not so much in facts … but rather in its emotional state" (C. Thompson, 2015, p.17). Emotions activate the right lower center of the brain called the limbic area (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 42). These emotions are not automatically conscious nor are they often verbalized, making it difficult to change or heal them. So, "if we approach [shame] as a problem that we can solve merely by changing how or what we think, we are likely to limit our effectiveness in combating it" (C. Thompson, 2015, p. 26). Because shame is "felt, sensed and imaged as much as it is thought" (C. Thompson, 2015, p. 27), replacing shame with a confident sense of acceptance and worth requires more than merely accepting new information about the self; it requires time and felt experience within an accepting community in addition to verbal expression and understanding. It requires deep transformation of one's unconscious life-interpretation. It will not be enough to simply tell the disciple that they need not feel ashamed. Practices will need to be adopted and church cultures will need to be formed which create experiences of safety, acceptance, and self-worth to the degree that the deeply felt sense of shame begins to make less sense as more and more worth-building experiences are built into the identity-narrative.

Shame cannot be simply prayed away. Connection with God's people is as important to healing as connection with God. Curt Thompson (2015) calls the church to be a community that heals shame, but recognizes that it will require "great courage" (p. 156). While the one who feels shame keeps "borders tightly closed and vulnerability at a minimum" (Thompson, 2015, p. 157), the Apostle Paul "casts a vision for a community of faith in which we carefully and diligently seek out, protect and honor those who are especially vulnerable and of whom we are easily tempted to be ashamed of" (Thompson, 2015, p. 157).

Thompson (2015) considers certain doctrinal positions particularly detrimental to people struggling with shame, those which "lead with the story that we are shameful sinners and follow up with the story that God loves us, rather than the other way around" (C. Thompson, 2015, p. 159). Chronologically, the Christian scriptures establish the foundation of human dignity and value in the first two chapters of Genesis before describing the fall into sin in the third chapter. Thompson above claims that the same order can be followed both in presenting the gospel and in building up one's own identity-narrative. People were made in the image of God to image God on earth, a role with dignity and significance; this is the foundation for the Christian identity-narrative and can be the foundation for the local church's cultural ethos.

Examen and Safe Relationships

The antidote to hiding – shame's knee jerk reaction – is being known. It is "challenging to create a culture of vulnerability" (C. Thompson, 2015, p. 161) because being known requires physical and relational safety. And the local church can sometimes lack people who are skilled at creating relational safety, particularly in response to culturally shameful behavior. In addition to learning how to be non-judgmental, congregations can become relationally safe. This is similar to, but wider than, non-judgmentalism. When confronted with injury or knowledge of

wrongdoing, relational safety gives mercy and forgiveness to those who seek it. This is not an abusive dynamic that refuses to confront injury and wrongdoing. Mercy will courageously speak truth about hurtful relational patterns, but the confrontation will be couched in love. The motivation will be the good of the offender, defined as redemption, correction, and transformation closer to Christlikeness. Forgiveness does not downplay sin, but faces it without flinching and calls it what it is; only then is there something to be forgiven. Only when the offense is recognized in its depth is forgiveness experienced in its depth. A relationally safe culture will move people through mercy and forgiveness in a way that encourages steadfast commitment to one another's good.

Working on creating a safe culture is crucial, for shame distorts how its sufferers interpret what they hear. When a teacher says, "deny yourself and love sacrificially," a shame-filled person might hear: "Stay in this abusive relationship. Suffering dehumanization is how you can show love." This twisted message resonates well with an inner story of low worth and helplessness. For many who have shameful identities, relationships will get to a certain depth and then the sufferer will pull back or engage in relationship-destroying behavior. Van der Kolk (2015) saw this played out in his research:

> The promise of closeness often evokes fear of getting hurt, betrayed and abandoned. Shame plays an important role in this.…You are likely to be preoccupied with not getting hurt again and fear opening up to someone new. In fact, you may unwittingly try to hurt them before they have a chance to hurt you (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 213).

Since relationships are the center of spiritual development, the Christian discipler will need to remain faithful and persevere in reaching out to those who struggle with building relationships deeper than acquaintance level. A discipleship program that focuses on facts and knowledge

about Jesus will have limited effectiveness in healing people who feel shame. The local church must create opportunities for relationships that help anchor identities in Christ and in community with Christ's people.

Not only is a safe relational culture important for those with shame-filled identity-narratives, it is also especially helpful to those who have been affected by trauma because "traumatic events shatter the sense of connection between individual and community" (Herman, 1992, p. 55). When trauma is chronic and early in a person's development, such as in cases of child abuse, the essential psycho-social skills to make connections with others are malformed or underdeveloped. But even a traumatic event later in life can undo a sense of safety that is the biological foundation for connection. Stephen Porges (2011) says, "If we are not safe, we are chronically in a state of evaluation and defensiveness" (quoted in Dana, 2018, p. 7). Whether trauma causes hyperarousal, withdrawal, or the intrusion of unwanted sensations (Herman 2015, pp. 35-47), the inseparability between the body's systems to detect safety and to connect to others means that relationships become very difficult for those suffering from the lingering effects of trauma - similar to those who struggle with shame.

Deb Dana (2018) makes the biological connection between feeling safe and being able to make social connections. Her work is based on the biological fact that the autonomic nervous system involves both one's responses to danger and safety, and one's "relational system toned in experience with others" (Dana, 2018, p. 123). Only when the neurological systems responsible for detecting and responding to danger are in a state of equilibrium and are not sensing any threats does the neurology necessary for connecting relationally become active and available. It is "the integration" of these neurological systems which allow us "to be compassionate, curious about the world we live in and emotionally and physically connected to the people around us"

(Dana, 2018, p. 15). The person who has experienced trauma can have difficulty in arriving at a state of neurological and emotional equilibrium and therefore can miss or misinterpret cues for connection. For example, “neutral faces [can] appear angry” (Dana, 2018, p. 25). One reason safe counseling relationships can help is the effect of co-regulation when self-examination becomes psycho-biologically difficult. In less intense cases, a safe small group at church can be just as helpful.

In order to engage in healthy interactions with others, a person regulates thoughts, emotions, and desires while sensing the other person’s state. If one struggles with self-regulation, relationships will be difficult, which means true sacrificial loving will similarly be difficult. Particularly for people affected by trauma, their past experiences influence “autonomic regulation, setting in motion a pattern of chronically active defense systems. The result is ongoing distress that alters a person’s ability to create and sustain nourishing relationships” (Dana, 2018, p. 50). Through a process called neurological sympathy or co-regulation, a person’s mirror neurons, which sense another person’s emotional state and seek to copy it, allow for emotional and mental connection. But trauma’s effect on the nervous system “makes co-regulation dangerous and interrupts the development of co-regulatory skills” (Dana, 2018, p. 45). Trauma makes compassion and empathy very difficult, which makes sacrificial living out of love also difficult.

Difficulty in connecting can be a downward feedback loop since connecting with other people is the way to uproot the effects of trauma on a person’s neurology. The effects of trauma can lead a person to say, “I need honest intimacy with others” (Ryan, 2012, p. 165) while simultaneously motivating actions which make intimacy difficult. The most helpful communities will patiently persevere alongside those who have encountered trauma as “a trustworthy place of

grace and acceptance" that allows the trauma survivor to feel "welcome, wanted and loved just for who they are" (Ryan, 2012, p. 183). People and communities flourish when they are given verbal permission to be transformed at their own pace in their own way. The Apostle Paul exemplifies this attitude of patience with others when he says, "Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained" (*English Standard version Bible,* 2001, Philippians 3:15-16). Paul, trusting the Spirit of God to lead each one who is his, can give people time to reach maturity; congregations that create environments of relational safety can give people time, too.

Allender (2016) found that addressing the damage caused by trauma requires comfort, kindness, and courage (p. 188). Healthy relationships help make hurting people healthier. These relationships will be found in safe communities that understand trauma, shame, and the relational nature of personhood, and have already experienced the grace and healing of God through Christ in the Spirit. Walking alongside those who struggle with the effects of trauma or with shame helps those who are providing the loving community, too. This is the mutual and reciprocal nature of God-centered relationships. Thompson (2010) describes this dynamic which every local church may aim for:

> When a person tells her story and is truly heard and understood, both she and the listener undergo actual changes in their brain circuitry. They feel a greater sense of emotional and relational connection, decreased anxiety, and greater awareness of and compassion for others' suffering. (p. xiv)

Those who seek to make disciples of people who have been affected by traumatic events need to be aware of repercussions on the personhood dynamics as described above. Deep healing may or may not require professional training. But "expert companions" (Tedeschi & Moore,

2016, pp. 107–108) from the lay people in a local church who understand basic facts about trauma and shame and who have interpersonal skills for deep listening and compassion can help people connect with others.

Even within the context of a healthy community, the process of self-awareness can cause physiological distress. In these cases, the context of embodiment provides a person with two different directions from which to approach self-regulation, according to van der Kolk (2015, pp. 63-64). On the one hand, one can engage the medial prefrontal-cortex, the place in the brain that engages when one evaluates and performs metathinking. From this direction, what van der Kolk calls top-down, one first becomes aware of what, why, and how one is thinking and then makes necessary changes. On the other hand, because human personhood is embodied, when top-down self-regulation is difficult, one can approach it from the bottom-up. This is done by first controlling one's muscle tension and breathing, or through touch or movement (also see Dana, 2018, ch. 12). The point is to change the biophysical context which might be preventing one from engaging the prefrontal cortex. Using those biological systems which are both autonomous and conscious (such as breathing), one can regulate one's emotions by consciously regulating one's physical activities. Many spiritual practices make use of this reality of human personhood. Deep breathing is especially helpful in the spiritual practice of prayer, especially as *examen* moves into confession. The in-out of breathing can lead the disciple to experience the dialectical renunciation of sin (out) and reception of forgiving grace (in). The next chapter discusses confession in more detail.

Through communities that are relationally safe, traumatized people can find relief and growth (Tedeschi & Moore, 2016). It is possible for them to "build new autonomic patterns, and the new patterns bring the beginnings of a new story" (Dana, 2018, p. 47). The local church can

be a place where these "healing relationships" (Herman, 1992, p. 133) create "safe surroundings" (Dana, 2018, p. 110) so that the trauma survivor can "find their voice" (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 332). Great care can be taken in forming a culture that does not shame, moralize, or judge people for apparent spiritual failures, recognizing that "judging each other is a human social cancer, a psychological comfort, our great moral failure. When we judge each other, we are least like Jesus" (Ryan, 2012, p. 179).

Healing from trauma and shame and telling healthier identity-narratives occurs best within the context of belonging to a relationally safe community. Small groups which provide a non-judgmental place to share and listen make a way for "collective empowerment" through "mutually enhancing interaction" (Herman, 1992, p. 216). These helpful groups might include communities as small as one or two others, or larger groups of 10-15 people with similar interests, or even the entire congregation and the people of God worldwide. As these connections bring healing and maturation, they allow for more intimate connections, creating a reinforcing cycle. Key to these safe communities is the ability to withhold judgment until the proper time and space. The *examen*, when engaged in a small group context, can over time help people with shame and trauma issues to grow at their own pace in self-exploration and self-evaluation. By example, with a concern for maintaining confidences, and the patient longsuffering that trusts the Spirit to reveal and convict in his right time, small communities can form a context in which those with trouble knowing the self and evaluating the self appropriately can heal and mature and become more adept at the spiritual practice of prayerful *examen*.

In this chapter I delved into the first stage of the spiritual practice of prayerful *examen*, the process of exploring the self. Recognizing the relational, embodied, and dialectical dynamics of prayer allows congregations to experience deeper transformation and flourishing through the

spiritual practices. Knowing the self more deeply opens the door to deeper intimacy, for one cannot give of what one is not consciously aware. Prayerful *examen* can also make intimacy safer because the process has the potential to strengthen one's identity in Christ and consciously transform any motivations and beliefs misaligned with the meaning and purpose derived from one's identity narrative. As disciples experience their identities through prayer with God and connection with God's people, they become better able to identify abusive dynamics and courageously and confidently confront them out of love for God and the other person.

Prayer is not automatically transformative and *examen* does not guarantee anchored identity in Christ and redemptive relationships. But when the disciple engages in the spiritual practice of *examen* in the context of a merciful, loving, and informed community, it has great potential to lead to flourishing relationships and mature personhood. The congregation can create an environment which encourages healthy self-exploration. Two key environmental elements are non-judgmentalism and relational safety. These are related concepts, though relational safety covers a wider spectrum of behaviors and attitudes than non-judgmentalism.

Non-judgmentalism is the withholding of evaluation for the purpose of self-discovery. Relational safety emphasizes mercy and forgiveness when self-condemnation leaks into the self-discovery process. Relational safety creates an environment that works hard so that connections are not broken by wrongdoing. This is possible because the community rests in the justification, cleansing, and reconciliation wrought by Jesus for believers. Self-discovery can safely go deeper without fear of rejection and with hope of steadfast love and a commitment to walk through all stages of spiritual transformation together. In the final chapter I will continue to explore the concept of the *examen*, looking at the second step, i.e., self-evaluation, and how it can lead into repentant confession which makes for redemption and flourishing for God's people. I will also

briefly look at how fasting as a spiritual practice can make other practices such as *examen* more fruitful for individuals and congregations.

Chapter Eight: Prayer in Personhood Development and Sacrificial Love: Confession, and Fasting

In the previous chapter I encouraged prayer as a deeper spiritual practice through engaging in what has historically been termed *examen*, a two-step process of exploring the self and evaluating the self. The daily *examen* usually includes activities such as asking for insight from God, reviewing one's actions and attitudes throughout the day, giving thanks, repenting, and renewing one's commitment to God and others (Holt, 2017, p. 138). I have discussed how exploring the self can help in developing mature personhood; now I will demonstrate how the second step of *examen*, evaluating what has been discovered in the self, can naturally flow into confession. I will also touch on how fasting can be combined with other spiritual practices, including *examen*, to deepen personhood development and ultimately lead to sacrificial loving that brings flourishing instead of dehumanization to communities.

Prayerful Evaluation and conscience

For the Christian who engages in the spiritual practice of *examen* prayer, after a time of non-judgmental self-exploration will come a time for self-evaluation. How do one's motivations, values, and choices measure up to the scriptures? Historically, Roman Catholic faithful use the Ten Commandments as a means to examine and measure the self, while Eastern Orthodox believers have used the Beatitudes (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 102). Note that both traditions place scripture prominently in the process for self-evaluation. As congregations lead their disciples in interweaving the spiritual disciplines, such as linking scripture reading and meditation with prayerful *examen*, they will lay solid groundwork for the Holy Spirit to deepen personal and communal transformation.

During prayerful reading of scripture, a disciple may become aware of a sin of commission or omission. This awareness will speak to the conscience and may inhibit further intimacy and the sense of God's presence. For the purposes of this dissertation I agree with E. L. Johnson (2007) that "the conscience is best understood as a faculty or module responsible for the *perception* of the ethical order of meaning. It has both mental structure and neural regions dedicated to its realization" (p. 342, emph. orig.). Although E. L. Johnson (2007) recognizes that "modern psychologists have been typically unwilling to ascribe modular status to the conscience," he also affirms that "the existence of the mental structure of the conscience has long been assumed in Christianity" (p. 342).

Just as for human reasoning and human emotions, the human conscience is not a perfectly reliable measurement of the morality of an action, attitude, or desire. It also does not "guarantee ethical behavior" (Reuschling, 2011, p. 367) any more than having an alarm clock guarantees you will get to work on time or a smoke alarm guarantees everyone will get out of a burning building safely. As a human faculty, the conscience is only as good as its training, for "it is the educating, nurturance, and use of conscience that fosters moral and spiritual growth and enables greater integrity between belief and behavior" (Reuschling, 2011, p. 367). Unfortunately, a conscience can be trained to be insensitive to certain sins and can also be trained to sound an alert for thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that are not truly sinful.

Looking at what influences a conscience emphasizes the R-E-D nature of the spiritual practice of prayer in *examen* and confession: "In Christian faith, conscience is nurtured and fed by the Scriptures, Christian tradition and community, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, as well as through practices that enable persons to take deliberate steps in acting according to conscience" (Reuschling, 2011, p. 368). Conscience sharpening is relational for it involves

reception to preaching, teaching, and counselors who can offer wise guidance (Reuschling, 2011, p. 368). Training the conscience for embodied human beings also includes participation in the sacraments, service to others, "taking steps to act," "practiced determination to live and act," and doing "the right things" (Reuschling, 2011, p. 368).

Maturation of the conscience is also dialectical, just as any teaching dynamic is, for it involves ignoring false alarms while simultaneously establishing correct sensitivities. Paul wrote to the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome who had differently-trained consciences. Conflict had arisen over eating meat (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Romans 15:1-2), drinking wine (Romans 15:21) and celebrating certain holidays (Romans 15:5-6). For the Jews, their consciences had been diligently trained about things clean and unclean (Romans 13:14) for thousands of years through community tradition, religious instruction, and family observance. The Gentiles had none of that training, and so their consciences were not offended by the freedom in Christ. The story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts chapter eleven illustrates how Peter's original understanding about unclean foods was torn down as his new understanding was built up. For Gentiles also, their old ways of measuring morality – concerning sexuality, wealth, striving for power, and a host of other areas – would have to be discarded and new ones adopted in order to grow in holiness, the discarding and adopting being dialectically related.

When alerting about possible, present, or past sins, the embodied conscience is experienced as physical as well as psychological distress. The conscience can cause anxiety and the sense of relational distance from God and his people; this can become one of the means through which God speaks to his children concerning the status of their relationships with him and others. The conscience, too, brings awareness to the disciple of the deep need for a priest and a spiritual cleansing. As the great High Priest, Jesus has given us his Spirit to be a counselor and

a cleanser. The Puritan John Owen (1656), in his work entitled *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, wrote that "the Holy Spirit is the great sovereign cause of the mortification of indwelling sin … He only is sufficient for this work" (Owen et al., 2006, ch. 3, p. 57). Jesus prophesied that the Holy Spirit, after Jesus's resurrection and ascension, would "convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, John 16:8). And Paul describes how Gentiles, who do not have the Jewish Law to convict them, still "show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Romans 2:15). The Holy Spirit applies either the written word of God, natural revelation, or both to each person's conscience.

A conscience honest before God can become clean before God, but each step must be taken in turn, theoretically if not temporally. When the Spirit of God convicts a conscience, there is a feeling of guilt and condemnation. This is not something to be avoided, but to be walked through. The Puritans, for example, advised Christians to "get a clear and abiding sense upon your mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of that sin wherewith you are perplexed" (Owen et al., 2006, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers,* ch. 10, p. 97). Honesty must come first, for "you are what you are, and you cannot be said to be better than you are in God's sight" (Kempis, 1940 Bk. II, ch.6). The temptation may come to abort this process because shame and guilt are difficult emotions to experience. It is easy to become concerned more with how one appears to others than with one's honest relationship with God and others. One might be successful in "public reputation management" (Helgason & Berman, 2022, n.p.), but "if you consider well what you are within, you will not care what men say about you" (Kempis, 1940, Bk. II, ch. 6).

When the believer lives within a community that exemplifies and produces non-judgmental self-discovery and relational safety, it becomes easier to listen to the conscience and allow it to carry the believer through the transformational process provided by spiritual practices. However, self-evaluation is not by default a convicting experience. Michel Foucault (1982) distinguished a difference between how the ancient Greeks envisioned self-examination compared with the early Christians. He lifts up Seneca as an example of the Greek idea; for Seneca, in self-examination of the conscience, "the self is both the judge and the accused" (Foucault, 1982, Lecture III). Additionally, the ancient Greek idea of self-examination was more administrative than moral. Foucault compares the Greek process to a comptroller looking over financial records or a building inspector looking at a house. For the Greek, self-examination was not comparing oneself to external virtues to find where one has kept or broken rules, but was more like ensuring proper civic methods were being followed. Only when the Christians came on the scene did self-examination become more of "a search for bad intentions" (Foucault, 1982, Lecture III). While his historical distinctions may be valid, Foucault unfortunately downplays the value of the Christian focus on moral standards.

For the Christian, in self-examination the self is the accused, but not the judge. The Spirit, through the written word of God and through the community of God, is the judge. Importantly for relational safety, the wise congregation will emphasize that this kind of judgment is of a different order than condemnation and rejection. Forgiveness requires correctly labeling sin as sin and even exploring the damage which sin commits against the self and the community. In this way judgment means discernment and truthful labeling, but retains fellowship through the mercy and forgiveness that Christ brings. This trains disciples to be consciously aware of how others transgress them, and works to eliminate dehumanizing behavior patterns which allow

hurtful actions to continue without confrontation. And yet the community does not have to fall into shame and guilt as motivators, but holds steadily to the dignity, significance, and purpose for each person.

Ideally, within this context the conviction of the conscience by the Holy Spirit is too heavy to bear without finding some relief. As the Puritan prayer declares, "No trial is so hard to bear as a sense of sin" (Bennett, 2002, p. 139). The weight of guilt leads the faithful to come again to Christ and his promises of the reconciliation of all things. Because of Christ there is hope even when discovering sin within oneself or one's community. Julian of Norwich despaired of sin and its destructive work on humanity and life, and she wondered if it would not have been better had the Lord not allowed for it. In one of her visions, in response to these unsettling musings, the Lord spoke to her, saying that despite the presence of sin in the world things were yet going to be well: "It is true that sin is the cause of all this pain, but all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well. These words were revealed most tenderly, showing no kind of blame to me or to anyone who will be saved" (Julian & Furlong, 1996, ch. 27, p. 31). For those who may take issue with Julian's concept of having no blame for her sin, it may be helpful to think of Romans 8:1 and 1 Peter 5:8 which speak of those in Christ as having no condemnation and who themselves cover over a multitude of sins. Jesus took the condemnation rightly deserved to be poured out on sinners and made a way for those who are being saved to be with God in this life without fear of shame, condemnation, or rejection. Because of the cross, resurrection, ascension, and session of Christ, believers can rest in the assurance that the divine Judge has already freed them from the relational consequences of their sin. Not only will "all be well," but all manner of things is currently being made well.

R-E-D Confession

The diagram in the previous chapter showed how *examen* – self-discovery and self-evaluation – can lead to confession and repentance, then a restoring of the self toward one's anchored identity in Christ, and bearing fruit in healthy sacrificial love that makes for a flourishing community. Confession and repentance are the bridge leading from self-evaluation to restoration. Confession and repentance flow out of *examen;* they are the way God offers to correct what we have seen wrong in ourselves which can be seen and experienced through most liturgy and worship in the Christian church (G. Smith, 2011, p. 661)..

The English word "confession" comes from two Latin words which together mean "to say along with" or "to agree." So one can confess the truth, saying, "Yes, I agree that these are the facts." Or one can confess one's faith, saying, "Yes, I believe these things." Or one can confess one's actions, saying, "Yes, I did that." By confessing his sins, a disciple is agreeing with God that his attitudes and actions (or lack thereof) were indeed wrong. This latter description is what is normally referred to when the church speaks of confession. So for the sake of this dissertation confession can be defined as "the verbal acknowledgement to God and oneself (and possibly others) of one's personal sins and sinfulness, analogous to lament" (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 510).

Repentance in the Greek is *metanoia,* literally a change of mind or a transformation in thinking. Repentance is more than feeling sorry that one's actions hurt others or didn't measure up. Repentance involves an establishment (or re-establishment) of one's identity into being God's child, a recommitment to living out that identity, and a turning away from any actions and attitudes that do not align with bearing God's image and family name. G. Smith (2011) recognized the importance of God's mercy as much as his justice in leading people to repent and confess when he says, "a rhythm of repentance was to flow from an awareness of God's just and

merciful character" (p. 662). Note that he also considers repentance to be an attitude taken up by Christians on a regular basis.

Like for personhood development and other spiritual practices, recognizing the R-E-D nature of confession and repentance can shed greater light on their work and effect. E. L. Johnson (2017), in the quote above, alludes to the way in which confession can be between believers as well as between an individual believer and God. Confession is, at its heart, a dialogue between the believer and God, but ideally with another believer as a witness for both sides; it is inherently relational. E. L. Johnson (2017) references James 5:16 – "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, – when he states, "Christianity also commends interpersonal confession" (p. 511). Bonhoeffer (1939) warns that confession done silently before God without the involvement of at least one other believer works against the purpose of the community God is creating and is less effective: "As long as I am by myself when I confess my sins, everything remains in the dark, but when I come face to face with another Christian, the sin has to be brought to light" (Bonhoeffer, 1939, quoted in Lakies, 2022, section 2). When a believer confesses his sin to God and another believer, the hearer can respond with assurance of forgiveness in Christ. This exemplifies Bonhoeffer's ideas of sacrificial being-with and being-for another (Lakies, 2022, section 2).

For the deepest effect, confession of sin will include confession to another person within the community of faith. Verbalizing one's confession and repentance of specific sin – as well as the verbalization of mercy, cleansing, forgiveness and reconciliation – in a safe relationship within the local church restores one's relationship with God's people in conjunction with one's relationship with God. Confession, then, is helped by not only the skill of self-knowledge but an awareness of safe belonging in community. Confession needs communion while at the same time

restoring and strengthening communion. As confession and receiving verbal affirmation of forgiveness are practiced regularly, the story of being accepted despite rebellion and treachery becomes ingrained into the identity-narrative. Disciples are increasingly assured that they are accepted by God as a child and not rejected as an enemy. This strengthens the identity for choosing open and honest intimacy. Sacrificial love becomes more understandable and more deeply possible without dehumanizing effects.

The connection between relationality and embodiedness in confession is seen in Clifford Green's (1999) explication of Bonhoeffer's theology of confession:

> By confessing to another we are delivered from the self imprisoned in itself, with its self-deception, self-justification and self-forgiveness—which is no forgiveness at all. More, by hearing the word of God's forgiveness pronounced by another, I receive an assurance which is truly for me because it is beyond me; I "experience the presence of God in the reality of the other" (quoted in Lakies, 2022, section 2).

Christian theology teaches that sin enslaves, imprisons, and blinds. But the physical presence of a fellow believer to whom we confess as we confess to God removes those constraints and obstacles to relationship. The promise of forgiveness and cleansing and the strengthening of identity as affirmed by God and accepted into his community is made more real when a physical brother or sister in Christ is present at the confession and verbalizes scriptural promises to the one confessing. Silent confession does not have the same effect as praying aloud to God alongside another. Shame and guilt "are better ameliorated when put into words" (E. L. Johnson, 2017, p. 510). Repentance feels more real when it is verbalized to another person who can share scriptures about God's cleansing and help in the future.

Misconstruals and dangers of confession

Confession is found in much of contemporary culture, though not always in the same sense or at the same depth as historical Christian confession. Confession is "an integral part of addiction recovery programs, a regular part of law enforcement, and a popular topic of tabloids and daytime talk shows" (Lowe & Haws, 2019, para. 2). But not all of these instances equate to the Christian understanding of confession, for not all are an experience of the Spirit of God impressing a sense of wrongdoing on the conscience of a person, and not all recognize the breakdown in intimacy between the offender and God and others. In fact, some view confession as a dangerous action between individuals leaving the one who confesses in a precarious position before the one to whom they confessed. Foucault (1982), for example, states that "throughout Christianity there is a correlation between disclosure of the self … and the renunciation of the self" (Lecture VI). Lakies (2022, section 1) understands Foucault's perspective on confession as an "evacuation of the self," of losing agency and placing oneself under the power of another through the act of self-exposure.

This concern seems related to the misconstruals of self-denial and sacrificial loving as being in some way dehumanizing and abusive. Remember that self-denial is not a lessening of the self or an emptying of the self in the sense of dehumanization. The person who denies the self before God does not become less of a person. Rather, self-denial is the dynamic God uses to bring people to maturity; it is a rightful aligning of the heart away from the self as authoritative interpreter, and placing the self under God's authority to declare the purpose and meaning of one's existence. When one lives and loves and chooses in accordance with one's true telos, then personal satisfaction, joy in the Lord, and blessedness are experienced. Confession is an element of self-denial and therefore is a step in the pathway to maturation. So, Foucault's (1982) understanding of confession does not take into consideration that for the Christian, confession

occurs under the auspices of Christ as Lord. Both the confessor and the one who hears the confession are equally servants; there is no power play beyond the power of forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption which God graciously gives.

Granted, confession to others of one's faults does risk losing social status and esteem. It has been noted that at least "one reason why people fail to confess is because they fear that admitting to past misdeeds will taint their present moral character" (Helgason & Berman, 2022, para. 2). This fear may be legitimate in certain environments, even some Christian environments if they are still struggling to mature in love and grace, but God is working to create communities in which it is safe for its members to confess to one another. Whether it is safe to confess to another believer will depend on many factors. Trustworthy people within trustworthy communities will most likely be found where one's identity and the community's identity are being established in what God says in scripture's metanarrative about human sin and God's transforming grace in the Spirit through Christ. Non-judgmentalism and relational safety make for an environment in which abusive dynamics are most likely to be absent, removing the larger barriers to exploring and evaluating the self, and making confession, repentance, and living in grace more likely.

So, concerning Foucault's "evacuation" or "renunciation" of the self, self-denial before God is a constant occurrence for the believer who is being given a new life of honor, purpose, and significance, "thus to use the language of 'self-renunciation' like what we find in Foucault is … to say something remarkably different" (Lakies, 2022, section 2) than what Christian theology declares. Followers of Jesus open themselves to his moral searchlight and his immense unending grace. God blesses those who repent with life and "leads them not into temptation" (*English*

Standard Version Bible, 2001, Matt. 6:13), so that they might live more righteously as they mature in personhood and sacrificial love.

As with other spiritual practices, the mere act or performance of confession brings no mechanistic promise of positive results. It is a relational engagement that relies on the condition of the heart (repentance) and on the maturity of the community for the depth of its connection and life change. While not a Christian study, Lowe & Haws (2019) have found that, outside of a religious context, in the case of confession of a comparatively light wrongdoing to another person, "the effect of confession on ensuing behavior depends largely on the amount of guilt a confessor feels regarding their behavior prior to confession" (Lowe & Haws, 2019, p. 1). In the Christian context, Thomas à Kempis recognizes that "one solid step [to heavenly consolation] is our heart's true sorrow" (quoted in Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 150).

Sorrow is a difficult emotion for some, so much so that believers can engage in behaviors that seek to avoid it. As embodied human beings, there may be uncomfortable physical responses to one's own sorrow or the sorrow of another. However, purposefully avoiding sorrow – a motivation misaligned with one's identity in Christ – may cause abusive behavior patterns to become habituated. Kempis understands that only through the uncomfortableness of sorrow can a believer find consolation and therefore a flourishing community. For this reason, congregational leaders will seek to create a community that is becoming comfortable with sorrow to the point that people are willing to walk with others through these spiritual practices.

Benefits of Confession

Jeremiah prophesied that God would "turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Jeremiah 31:13). Perhaps as part of that fulfillment, Jesus sought to comfort his disciples at the Last Supper by

telling them that, “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world” (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, John 16:20-21). In this broken world, the path to joy passes through sorrow, and the seed must die in order to bear fruit (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, John 12:24). As in self-denial, which renounces a previously held position in order to claim the new one which brings life and fulfillment, so in confession the believer dialectically finds happiness through sorrow.

Lowe & Haws (2019) also found other benefits arising out of confession to others, noting that “confession can help to alleviate feelings of guilt, and can even improve physical health and feelings of calmness” (Lowe & Haws, 2019, para. 8). Improved physical health is unsurprising when the embodiedness of human personhood is considered. Carrying unconfessed guilt can have a deleterious bodily effect, but “self-disclosure can actually be rather psychologically rewarding in and of itself, activating reward-like processes in the brain” (Lowe & Haws, 2019, para. 10). Helgason & Berman (2022), also secular in their approach, found that “confessing to a misdeed not only helps right a wrong but also provides a deep sense of relief” (Helgason & Berman, 2022, para. 1).

Confession of sin is a decision to walk in reality by speaking what is true about the self, even as the gaps between what is good and what is true about the disciple’s inner life – what some call “self-discrepancy” (Lowe & Haws, 2019, para. 16) – are exposed. Confession of sin repairs one’s identity by re-interpreting what one had been hiding. Lowe & Haws (2019) describe confession as having a reframing effect, i.e. it presents an “improved understanding” of the events (para. 17). They do not elaborate on what makes a new self-understanding “improved”

over an earlier one. For the Christian an "improved understanding" will mean more closely aligned with truth as demonstrated in the Christian scriptures.

Against this improved understanding brought about through repentant confession, stand attitudes of self-justification, excuses, and ignoring facts about one's story all of which contort the interpretation of the narrative one is telling about the self. But when disciples speak the truth about their evil motives, wicked desires, and disordered loves – and are received by God and his people in love, forgiveness, and reconciliation – their interpretations of their stories change. God waits "for us to be real about our shame so he can meet us in it and then rewrite our narratives" (C. Thompson, 2010, p. 230) with hope and a restored purpose to love others sacrificially as we have been loved. In confession, we remember our telos, that we were made for God, belong to God, and will one day happily spend forever with him; this is the first meditation Ignatius walks through with those in spiritual retreat. We repent when we realize what we were before was not recognizing the telos God has established for us in Christ.

Examen and repentant confession are truly identity forming spiritual practices. Helgason & Berman (2022) found that reflecting on identity change increases confession and decreases justification of past misdeeds (general discussion, para. 1). In the non-Christian context of their study, "identity change" refers to the person's self-understanding that they are a different person who more closely follows right ethics at the time of confessing than they were at the time the misdeed occurred. If the confessing person can say, "I am not that person anymore," then it is easier to confess the offense, perhaps because it seems that the guilt and judgment from the behavior doesn't apply to them any longer. For the Christian, however, one's past behavior is not justified by future self-improvements but through the blood of Christ. This is at the root of the identity change and requires no hiding, self-protection, or self-justification. The Christian's

justification comes from the death and resurrection of Christ, not from a commitment to be a different and better person.

There is an internal cleansing that comes from confession, a dialectical removal of confusion and division within one's self alongside a restoration of integrity. Reception to God's words and ways becomes possible again. The confession of sin, according to Kempis, makes reception of God through meditating on and celebrating him – what he calls "heavenly consolation" (quoted in Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 150) – more deeply possible. Mirroring Jesus's teaching on the relationship between prayer and forgiving others (Matthew 6:14; Mark 11:25-26), Kempis also connects confession with forgiving others, "Pray for your own sins and negligences. Forgive the vain things the vain people have done" (quoted in Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 151). This insightfully illustrates the bridge between self-exposure before God and its fruit of attitudes necessary for mercy and sacrificial love toward others.

Kempis's thought supports the connection I make between *examen*, confession, identity formation, and sacrificial love. Sacrificial love that does not dehumanize is in some ways reliant on a clear conscience before God kept through the spiritual practice of confessing prayer within God's community of believers. Local churches will do well to train disciples how to create safe environments and opportunities for *examen* and confession. This will bear fruit in disciples with identities anchored in Christ and the church community, freed from the detrimental pull of shame and self-protection. Because hiding sin extends one's suffering and isolation while simultaneously delaying one's joy and fellowship with God, prayerful confession heals disciples and reconnects them to the congregation in order to love sacrificially in a healthy way.

I have made the case that the *examen* is a specific kind of prayer which can be practiced in two separate steps, self-discovery and then self-evaluation. There are deep hindrances to

exposing and judging the self which a congregation can mitigate by creating a non-judgmental and relational safe environment full of truth, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion. If and when prayerful *examen* reveals motivations, desires, or actions which do not love God, others or the self as one should, confession is the next step. Confession and repentance cleanse the conscience and can heal relationships. None of these spiritual practices are easy and they each can be twisted to further dehumanizing or abusive patterns. One way to deepen the effectiveness of spiritual practices is joining them with fasting which has the potential to help in identifying and breaking down abusive patterns as well as barriers to honesty before God and others.

Fasting

Fasting fell off in popularity and influence in the Western church for most of the last century, but there has been a revival in interest and participation in fasting in this current century (Baab, 2011, p. 442). Of all the spiritual practices discussed so far, fasting – "the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 61) – most clearly involves an attitude of self-denial. Instead of adding to one's activities, like bible reading and prayer do, fasting takes something away. Fasting deeply engages the physical body, but it would be a mistake to see fasting as solely a physical exercise. Foster and Griffin's definition above includes key words which help distinguish fasting as a spiritual practice from other activities.

As a spiritual practice, fasting will be voluntary, not accidental or circumstantial. Fasting involves the renunciation of an otherwise normal function, so it does not include renouncing sin or activities that are hindering one's relationship with God; that is a completely different dynamic entirely. And fasting as a spiritual practice will arise from a motivation related to one's

spiritual relationships with God, the self, and others. Spiritual fasting is not engaged in for solely physical reasons, say to lose weight or cleanse the digestive system.

In this regard, fasting is most effective when it is accompanied by other disciplines such as *examen* prayer and scripture reading. Giving up food or other licit activity in spiritual fasting can include dedicating the time normally meant for eating to activities that involve one's relationship with God. M. J. Thompson (2015) says, "fasting and prayer … seem to be the most effective tools in clearing away our self-preoccupation" (p. 92). Foster (2007) sees fasting as vital to prayer but subordinate to it (p. 66). Fasting is not an end in itself but an aid for other practices. John Calvin commended it to "(1) subdue the needless desires of 'the flesh', (2) prepare for prayer and meditation; and (3) express humility before God in confession" (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 82).

Some have reported that fasting has added power to their prayers (Baab, 2011, p. 443), but it is unclear what is meant by "power." Does fasting bring about more answers to prayer than those prayed without fasting? In Thompson's understanding of Calvin above, fasting is not considered a means to make prayer more successful. It is not something that manipulates, impresses, or motivates God toward the one fasting; rather, it prepares the disciple to meet with God by deepening humility and the sense of dependence on God.

Some agree with Thompson's summary of Calvin's thought on fasting, that it can "subdue the needless desires of 'the flesh.'" By purposefully resisting licit physical desires, the disciple hopes to train the spirit to more readily resist illicit ones, for "in contemporary U.S. culture, fasting … may serve to produce bodies that can withstand the seductions of a culture of consumption and desire" (Lysaught, 2000, pp. 269–270). As embodied persons, there are times when our spirits must work against our physically felt desires and lusts. Strength for this spiritual

battle comes after prolonged self-discipline experienced through spiritual practices. As one engages personal agency in resisting the desire for food or other comforts, agency is strengthened, just like physical muscles are strengthened through training and use. “Fasting can increase one’s sense of freedom and strength” (Holt, 2017, p. 91), characteristics of personal agency. A stronger personal agency, guided by the telos of an identity-narrative anchored in Christ’s story, is able to love sacrificially while resisting dynamics that might lead to abusive dynamics. When fasting is coupled with other spiritual practices, the disciple thus trained is more likely to be open to listening to God, the self, and others. The renunciation involved with fasting develops personal traits which more readily deny the self before God and love others sacrificially.

Fasting can sharpen the skill of self-knowledge by bringing “into focus the real values of life, resulting in a sense of interdependence with others and dependence on God” (Holt, 2017, p. 91). The revealing of one’s inward dynamics, accompanied by prayer, meditation, and confession, builds humility and thankfulness as well as a desire for the deeper spiritual satisfactions that come through relationships instead of material things. In spite of our own predilection to covering up our true motives, hiding them even from our regular conscious thoughts in order to prevent shame, fasting “reveals what controls us. You see, we cover up with food and other good things what is inside us, but in experiences of fasting these come to the surface” (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 61). Frykholm (2005) recognizes the “mindfulness” that arises out of fasting and its physical pains when he says that “it helps us be attentive to our own bodies, our own desires and the demands of our own flesh” (para. 4).

Fasting also confronts and threatens “the unconscious assumptions on which our lives are built” (M. J. Thompson, 2015, p. 83). By removing the regular and often mindless responses to

our physical desires, we become more deeply aware of our internal dynamics, of any dependence on things outside ourselves for our own existence. This is a reawakening of our need for God and others, that without them we cannot continue to exist. Because hidden motives can drive dehumanizing relational dynamics, fasting's ability – when joined with meditative prayer and immersion in scripture – to uncover those very same hidden motives can be an integral part of building healthy personhood that loves sacrificially without perpetuating abuse.

R-E-D fasting

The R-E-D nature of spiritual fasting may explain its powerful effects on personhood development and community flourishing. Historically, fasting has maintained a strong relational nature. The Western church could learn from the two-thirds world's concept of fasting, where it is much more commonly encouraged as a communal activity (Baab, 2006, p. 443). In non-Western areas of the world it is not uncommon for "weekly or monthly congregational fast days [to be] announced, with specific prayer requests to accompany the fast" (Baab, 2006, p. 443). In the West, it may be advisable to recognize publicly to the congregation that fasting from food is not suggested for those with a history of eating disorders, or who are on certain medications, or who have certain health conditions; in these instances communal fasting can make room for some to participate in the communal fast through renouncing technology or another treasured pleasure for the allotted time. This widening of the definition of fasting welcomes more of the believing community to engage together and affirms the value and dignity of each member no matter their history or present circumstances.

When exercised in a public way, there is a danger that fasting might be used as a means to raise one's spiritual ranking in comparison to others, but approaching this spiritual practice with biblically accurate understandings and boundaries will help keep community members from

this pitfall. We have record of Jesus fasting privately; we can assume he also fasted communally when the time for fasting in the Jewish calendar arose, such as on the Day of Atonement. The apostles and the early church fasted as a community. Their example connects fasting to prayer and especially to seeking God's will, such as when the church in Antioch prayed before sending Paul and Silas on their first mission trip (Acts 13:2). The Old Testament prophets and saints often prayed and fasted as a means of showing humility, contriteness, and the renunciation of sin before God, both as individuals and as a nation. Fasting has God's blessing as a spiritual practice which can grow one's identity as a Christian and as a member of God's redemptive community.

Fasting can aid in personhood development because humans are embodied souls and fasting emphasizes this connection between the soul and the body. Phyllis Tickle (2009) in the foreword of McKnight's (2009) book states that Christian fasting "asserts that soul and body are, and that neither is without the other" (p. xiii). Baab (2006) likewise says, "If we do it well, fasting more than other spiritual disciplines affirms the integral relationship between body and soul and spirit" (p. 13-14). However, not everyone agrees that fasting emphasizes the unity of soul and body. McKnight (2009) concurs with me that any concept of fasting that posits a dichotomy between the physical and spiritual in human beings is a false one. Noting that the contemporary West's separation between body and spirit is one reason why fasting is sometimes misunderstood in churches, McKnight (2009) posits, "Fasting, frankly, doesn't make sense to most of us until we have grasped the importance of the body for our spirituality" (p. 12).

Baab (2006) has encountered people who disagree that fasting emphasizes the unity of human personhood. She quotes a woman who cannot envision fasting as a healthy spiritual discipline because it

> runs the risk of being theologically or spiritually abusive. It surely calls on the perceived dichotomy between body and soul, physical and spiritual, as if there can be no integration, no unity, no fullness of self.… Deny the body. Deny the appetites. (13)

This concern about fasting being an abusive practice must be answered, for it strongly contradicts my point in this chapter that fasting actually builds one's personhood and therefore serves to prevent abusive dynamics in sacrificial relationships. However, the anonymous woman's concerns may help us remember that there are dangers involved in fasting as a spiritual practice. Congregations will want to emphasize that spiritual fasting does not consider the body to be evil. We were created as embodied people by God and so our bodies are good – the incarnation reveals the goodness of human physicality because it "demonstrates that God highly values the material creation. Physical reality is not inherently evil as claimed by Greek metaphysical dualism" (Demarest, 2011b, pp. 530–531). In fact, the incarnation emphasizes the "high dignity and significance" (p. 531) of each person made in the image of God, a concept central to rejecting abusive relational dynamics and any dehumanization. Perhaps one way to emphasize this for a congregation would be a communal breaking of the fast in which food, drink, and fellowship are celebrated with thanksgiving as good gifts from God.

The woman quoted by Baab (2006) above rejects Christian fasting, believing that it breaks apart the unity of human personhood by encouraging the denial of the body's urges. We live in a culture that resists denying the self and believes strongly in following whatever urges might arise from within in order to be authentically one's self. Some have "become subtly convinced that the indulgence of every appetite is psychologically and physically healthy. *If I forego any pleasures, I might be diminished as a person*" (Baab, 2006, pp. 19–20, emph. orig.).

Denying one's passions through fasting is not punishment or penitence, but practice and training in spiritual freedom (Frykholm, 2005, para. 9-13).

Additionally, from at least Medieval times many have seen fasting as a means to cleanse the spirit (not the digestive system), atone, and purify (Collier, 2020), and this drove some Medievals to such extremes that by their own written testimony they certainly did abuse their bodies. It makes sense that if one were to hold that spiritual fasting abuses bodies and that denying one's desires demeans the self then Christian fasting would be detrimental to one's spiritual and psychological well-being.

However, Dallas Willard (1991) would disagree that fasting assumes a dichotomy in human beings, for he states that "the new life in Christ simply is not an inner life of belief and imagination, even if spiritually inspired. It is a life of the whole embodied person in the social context" (quoted in McKnight, 2009, p. xix). Foster and Griffin (2007) also consider personhood to be embodied in a unifying manner, and so can say that "we are embodied spirits, that is, we are created in such a way that we express our spirituality through our bodies" (Foster & Griffin, 2007, p. 289). Even more than expressing our spirituality, our physicality informs and forms our spirituality. Therefore, spiritual practices such as fasting do not separate the physical from the spiritual, nor do they envision denying physical desires as punishment or rejection of the physical; rather, due to the embodiedness of personhood, the physical aspects of spiritual practices train both the physical and the spiritual aspects of the disciple.

In addition to relational and embodied, fasting is essentially dialectical in nature, being a losing that involves gaining, and gaining that comes only from losing. Going temporarily without food or refraining from other needs or pleasures is a loss that "nurtures prayer, makes space for God, and helps Christians experience their need for God" (Baab, 2011, p. 443). Fasting is a way

to tell God that one desires him more than food. It can express deep mourning or deep desire. Interwoven with *examen* prayer and scripture meditation, it can shape one's personhood in the deeper places, by encouraging self-denial without self-diminishment.

Fasting can become dialectically beneficial when the time and space normally used for eating (or other activity) can be filled with bible study and prayer. Or, for example, the money normally spent on the temporarily renounced activity is freed up for spiritual purposes such as giving to the needy (Baab, 2011, p. 443) for "in addition to its connection with prayer, Christian fasting involves a concern for justice" (Baab, 2011, p. 442). To connect fasting with service and social justice Baab references God's condemnation of self-righteous religious fasting in Isaiah: "Is not this the fast that I choose:… to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2001, Isaiah 58:6-7). By this process, fasting's R-E-D nature is especially shown in giving up something in order to give to the physical needs in one's community. In this example, sacrificial love for others is produced by the very engagement in spiritual practices.

Part Three Summary

These last three chapters have shown that personhood can be matured through engagement in spiritual practices. I used Scripture reading, *examen* prayer with repentant confession, and fasting as examples, but the same could be said for any historically Christian spiritual practice, including worship, communion, service to others, financial giving, silence, and retreating. Just as personhood development is R-E-D in nature, so we find that the spiritual practices which develop personhood are also relational, embodied, and dialectical. The kind of

personhood developed by engagement in spiritual practices is one that is increasingly skilled and experienced in self-denial before God.

Scripture reading and meditation can be an engine empowering the disciple to deny his own interpretation of creation and his place in it. It is a practice that can move the center of one's existence from the self to God; God becomes the lodestone by which, for which, and to which all things exist. In the Christian scriptures God reveals the universe's true metanarrative which explains how and why things came to be and the end to which all things are going. When disciples accept this authoritative narrative, their identity-narratives become one with the larger saga. It gives a significance and dignity to her which rejects dehumanizing abuses and works to bring about a flourishing community through loving sacrificially.

Examen prayer can be a key means through which God shepherds disciples to continually align their motivations, loves, and actions with their true identity in Christ. *Examen* opens the door for celebrating where God is present in one's life and confessing where one wants to grow in love for God and others more deeply. Congregations made up of people who regularly practice *examen* prayer are able to better create environments of non-judgmentalism and relational safety that encourage *examen* even more widely and deeply. Sacrificial loving does not dehumanize the lover because the identities of disciples are not based on the sacrificial love they give, but on the sacrificial love they have already received by God and his community of the faithful. Identities anchored in Christ find abusive dynamics anathema to their significance and purpose.

Fasting as a spiritual practice can develop healthy self-denial by living out one's dependence on God for all things by walking through physical hunger or psychological/emotional hunger. Fasting can also prioritize spiritual needs over physical ones – whether repentant sorrow, humble wisdom, or desperation for and celebration of God's presence

– which develops the character traits necessary to sacrificially love God and others. Denying oneself certain normal pleasures deepens self-knowledge about what one desires and why and how one is living in love or not. For these reasons, fasting can become an important partner with other spiritual practices, deepening personal development, and community-building.

Local congregations can adopt spiritual disciplines as an aide to mature disciples who are denying themselves before God and learning how to love one another with healthy relational dynamics. Care can be taken to develop environments around spiritual disciplines to ensure that they are building up the identity and character necessary for the kind of sacrificial love that builds up individuals while bringing righteousness and peace to community relationships.

Conclusion

Self-denial and sacrificial love are seen by some as dehumanizing, they psychologically make a person less than they could be, and they open the disciple to be manipulated or abused. This is a serious problem for those who understand that God intends human beings to flourish spiritually. There are several ways to correct it. The first is to eliminate the idea of sacrificial love and self-denial completely from the Christian ethic. But this is untenable for any who consider the scriptures to be authoritative in the sense that they can be applied according to the original authors' intents. Only by taking a progressive approach to scripture, believing it to need updating according to more modern and enlightened perspectives, can this position be held. As this author does not interpret the Christian scriptures in this way, if a different approach to the problem can be found without sacrificing the plain teaching of Jesus and the New Testament, it would be preferred.

Another option would be to seek to balance self-denial with self-care, and to balance sacrificial love for others with a certain love for the self. In many regards this approach is more tenable, for self-care and self-love are concepts found in the scriptures. However, there is something less than completely satisfying about it. Realistically, it is difficult to discern when these types of balance are achieved. Is it to be a fifty-fifty engagement, where I measure the time and energy given to the self and to others? The impracticality arises, it seems, from a subtle but significant misunderstanding of the dynamics involved in self-denial and sacrificial love.

My theoretical approach

This dissertation seeks to solve the problems of dehumanization and abuse by presenting a clearer and more biblical conceptualization of self-denial and sacrificial love. Ultimately, I find that self-denial actually anchors human personhood in Christ in such a manner that it forms a

strong basis for psychological, emotional, and spiritual maturity. Additionally, sacrificial love for one another from the biblical perspective is the means God's Spirit uses to form more flourishing communities. Self-denial does not dehumanize; self-sacrificing love does not perpetuate abusive relationships.

Additionally, self-denial and self-care are not competing forces to be balanced; nor do sacrificial love for others and love of self need to be balanced as competing forces. Instead, self-denial as presented by Jesus is motivated by self-care and strengthens the sense of self before God, while the biblical love of others is intricately interwoven with love of God and love of self. Both the "balancing" perspective and the "elimination" approach hold a negative view of self-denial and sacrificial love, perceiving them as draining and lessening to personhood. This is not the biblical conception of the dynamics within the Christian life.

The groundwork of my theoretical approach to the issue is twofold. First, I distinguish between self-denial and sacrificial love. This is crucial because self-denial specifically concerns one's relationship with God while sacrificial love concerns one's relationships with other people. There are distinct differences between relating to God and relating to other human beings; God is the holy Creator and sovereign Lord over each person while human beings are inherently equal in worth and dignity. Christians are never called to deny themselves before other people in the same sense of Jesus's invitation to his disciples to deny themselves before God, yet Christians are called to sacrifice in love for others.

Secondly, recognizing the Relational, Embodied, and Dialectical (R-E-D) nature of human personhood and its development can be a trustworthy guide to identifying and resisting dehumanizing or abusive dynamics in relationships. In any particular social context, if someone is commodified instead of engaged in connecting relationality; or, if someone's human

limitations, weaknesses, or boundaries are ignored; or, if loving the self and loving others is seen as in competition with each other, then these are serious warning signs of dehumanization and abuse. Additional problems arise when humans are seen as atomistic individuals, or as dualistic spirit/body beings, or when human maturity is taken as involving oppositional instead of opposing forces. The R-E-D nature of human beings and their development can guide how one evaluates social dynamics to identify and confront abuse or dehumanization.

Personhood Development is R-E-D and involves identity formation

Human personhood is formed within relationships, by relationships, and for relationships. No one can understand who they are outside of how they connect to God and other people. Our culture, which is experienced through multitudinous relationships with others around us, shapes how we think, what we feel, why we act, and how we answer the deepest existential questions. People are embodied souls, the two facets of being human – physical and metaphysical – inescapably intertwined. Human development involves opposite intermutual dynamics. To become a fully realized person requires individuation (separating from others) and integration (connecting to others), two dynamics which are conceptually opposite but can only occur with and by each other. Individuation happens through integration and vice versa. Similarly, the relational dynamics of giving and receiving are most healthy when they are dialectically connected. The example of Jesus and the New Testament reveals that the deepest givers are the most deeply blessed; those who receive the most do so by giving the most.

Personal identity is an interpretive dynamic accomplished through creating a narrative about one's relationships with God, others, and the rest of creation. Narrative provides meaning and mission by highlighting one's significance and describing one's purpose. As a narrative, identity holds an origin and ending which reveal one's telos, the purpose for one's existence.

This becomes the motivation from which actions arise. For example, if one's identity-narrative explains the self in connection to the rest of creation as being in an adversarial relationship, then one's motivation may well become self-protection or self-advancement above and against other people. Or if one's identity-narrative explains the self as weak, unimportant, and easily conquered, this may motivate actions such as pulling away from intimacy, or it may create emotional states of anxiety and depression.

In addition to mission and purpose, one's identity-narrative also provides significance and meaning to one's life from which one's sense of dignity arises. In general, each disciple is part of the history of humankind's rebellion against the Creator, as well as a recipient of God's loving actions to reverse the consequences of such rebellion. God created the church as a community of believers who grow in love for one another and for God, working alongside him, empowered and gifted by the indwelling Spirit to restore justice, goodness, and love to all relationships, as much as it depends on them. Each human being is important to God, made in his image, and therefore inherently having significance and dignity. This is what it means to be a human being, and any relational dynamics which ignore or work against this meaning or denigrate this significance are antithetical to one's identity in Christ.

Self-denial anchors personhood in Christ

Contrary to the fears and concerns of some, self-denial involves neither a lessening nor a denigrating of any element of a disciple's personhood. Some misconceptions may arise out of an inaccurate idea of what the "self" is. Historically, there was little emphasis on the self as an individual because the self was viewed from a strongly social perspective; people understood themselves as they related to their ethnicity, religion, location, and place in society. Only recently has the concept of the self become so strongly psychologized and individualized. So

when someone from within contemporary sensibilities hears “self-denial,” they assume that personhood is being denied or lessened.

But Jesus and the New Testament writers saw self-denial as something different than dehumanization. Biblically, self-denial has a specific referent, only being mentioned by Jesus concerning one’s relationship with God. Self-denial is a renouncing of one’s self-made interpretation of the self alongside a simultaneous adoption of God’s interpretation of the significance and purpose of the disciple. Self-denial removes oneself as the authoritative interpreter and definer of the self, the deepest form of self-centeredness. The need for self-denial assumes that before repentance and faith, each person has developed a warped and wrong self-understanding. Because of the R-E-D nature of human personhood, self-denial will have psychological, emotional, and lived-out bodily consequences.

In self-denial the disciple finds new purpose. The disciple’s telos in Christ is full redemption and endless benediction. Out of this telos arises a striving to love God, others, and creation more deeply. This motivation will include a desire for justice, goodness, and righteousness in one’s community and around the world. These new missions and meanings will resist dehumanization and abuse.

For example, if a Christian disciple is in a relationship in which the partner denigrates their dignity or seeks to control them, a self-identity in Christ will see these dynamics as contrary to the goodness and flourishing that Jesus seeks in the world. A lesser dignity is not only outright false but it works against the mission which God has given to the disciple. The disciple is beloved, indwelled by God, and supernaturally gifted to bring God’s glory wider in the world and more deeply in one’s life. Self-protection from abusive dynamics is pleasing to God in this case, for it works to further his redemptive purposes in the disciple’s life and through the

disciple's ministry. But in a different case an overactive sense of self-protection might prevent a disciple from engaging intimately within a safe community. God's loving family of sanctified believers in Christ can motivate the disciple to leave this detrimental kind of self-protection and flourish within the community. In both of these cases, the mission arising out of God's identity-narrative of the disciple is rejecting abusive dynamics and encouraging healthy ones.

Furthermore, it would not be considered sinful self-advancement to insist on being respected in the face of dehumanization, because God's mission includes the greater development of each person's rightful dignity as his personal creation. What defines self-advancement as either good or destructive is its place within the metanarrative of God's purposes. These are just a few examples of how the identity-narrative arising out of self-denial before God can recognize dynamics that hinder the expression of his dignity and significance.

Focusing on self-denial's nature as relational, embodied, and dialectic sheds more light on how self-denial anchors and encourages maturity in personhood. Relationally, self-denial reconciles the disciple with God and with God's people, laying the foundation for God's desired flourishing community of justice, love, and righteousness. The embodiedness of human beings means we can live out our purpose in loving actions towards others. Our embodiedness reminds us that we are dependent on God and one another, heightening the importance of healthy community dynamics so that each person's significance and dignity are recognized and each person's God-given mission can be helped forward. It gives us context to be compassionate with ourselves and with others because our embodiedness includes weaknesses, limitations and imperfections, some of which will not be corrected in our lifetime. The embodiedness of emotions, thinking, and choosing means that the neurology and other physical systems which

make for one's personhood are not always understood by the person or under their conscious control. This emphasizes the need for love, grace, self-knowledge, and listening to others.

The dialectical nature of self-denial means that whatever loss is involved in the dynamic includes gain. Renouncing the false self occurs with an adoption of the true self. An old direction is replaced with a new direction; as the false glory is being set aside, one's true glory is being revealed. Self-denial includes not only a rejection of core identity dynamics, but the adoption of new ones, so that what at first appears to be loss is actually eternal gain. The disciple leaves behind the former life, but also leaves behind the death which it was bringing. Self-denial is the way to life, flourishing, and rewards.

Sacrificial love makes for flourishing communities

Biblical love is wise, R-E-D benevolence. Wisdom is required to love well because benevolence requires knowing what good is in any particular situation and then working for it in a way that fits the specific context. The deeper one's wisdom, the greater understanding of the good, and therefore, the best good can be strived for. The desire to bring about the greatest good for the other is benevolence.

The goal of love is wider than just bringing about the good of the other, however, for love often desires intimacy with the beloved. Intimacy occurs when both parties reveal themselves to each other and both parties receive each other as they are. It is this intimate element of love that makes for the greatest risk of abuse, for in exposing and offering the self there is a danger of being rejected and shamed.

In sacrificial love, the disciple gives up a certain good for the self in order to achieve good for another person. Sometimes the exchange of sacrificial love is mutual, but in most relationships sacrifices are not mutually offered all the time. In any particular relationship or at

any particular time, sacrificial love may become asymmetrical. However, three elements of sacrificial love can guard against asymmetrical sacrificing becoming abusive: its foundation in one's identity in Christ, self-love's place in loving others, and using the R-E-D nature of love to measure its health. As their identities become more deeply anchored in the Christ narrative, disciples grow in assurance of their own significance, worth, and dignity. Relationships which consistently denigrate one's worth, significance or dignity can then be recognized and with wisdom and God's grace can be confronted, changed or - if repentance and transformation of the offending party doesn't seem possible - stepped away from.

Identifying oneself as a Christ follower includes adopting a mission to glorify and image the Creator Savior; sacrificial love flows out of this meaning and purpose. As seen in Jesus's life, sacrificial love will never mean losing one's identity or mission; just the opposite, it might mean resisting the desires of others if those desires work against the redemption and grace that God is bringing into the world. Loving relationships carry obligations, and these obligations must be prioritized in order to remain faithful to God and one's identity in him. Augustine and Bernard distinguished between a good and bad love of self: the bad kind results in self-centeredness, selfishness, and damage to others; the good kind loves others in the context of love from God, love for God, and recognizing the common goodness of all human beings, including the self. Since the self is loved by God, disciples can rightly love themselves in light of this humble relationship with God. In this dynamic, self-love generates a desire to sacrificially love others.

As with self-denial and identity formation, measuring one's circumstances against the R-E-D nature of sacrificial love can give warning about possible abusive dynamics. What is motivating the sacrifices which one is making – one's mission-identity in Christ, fear of rejection, avoidance of conflict, manipulation of the other person? Do the dynamics of the

relationship honor both persons' personhood and human limitations? Is there evidence of mutuality, and if not, are the reasons for the asymmetricality consistent with one's identity, purpose, and significance in Christ?

Spiritual practices can form identities who love sacrificially

I apply the theoretical framework presented in this dissertation to the local congregation in practical ways. Local churches can include psychological and emotional maturity in their definition of spiritual growth. A mature disciple of Jesus will be one with an identity anchored in him, who sacrificially loves others from that safe and healthy foundation to participate in the redemption that God is bringing to the world through the Spirit. Spiritual practices both develop and engage the personal skills needed for following Christ faithfully, such as self-knowledge, listening non-judgmentally, honesty, and community connection. While there are some dangers to avoid, such as spiritual bypassing, mission drift, and overemphasizing the human side of spiritual transformation, taking up spiritual practices with an eye to personhood development and flourishing communities can bring about deeper and long-lasting change.

Scripture reading as a spiritual practice is most effective when two somewhat different approaches are engaged: taking in larger sections in order to better grasp the metanarrative, and focusing on smaller sections in context with an eye to particular application and personal change. The metanarrative of scripture is especially important for forming the identity of the individual disciple and the congregation as a community of faith. Scripture tells one story; its beginning and its end inform the telos of the disciple and the congregation. Biblical history is the history of each believer and each church; the consummation of all things and final redemption of all creation through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, as described in the book of Revelation, areeach believer's a nd every faithful congregation's end.

Larger sections of scripture can be read in large gatherings for the purpose of communal identity building. They can also be discussed in smaller gatherings to guide believers to understand their own story within the larger one. It is more common through sermons and lessons in both large and small groups to look at smaller sections of scripture for personal application. Time can be taken to slow this process down, to meditate on the meanings in context, and to open one's person to what the Spirit is saying to the individual and the group through the Word. Even single sentences or concepts such as kingship and adoption, for example, can be fodder for meditation for long periods of time, as long as the biblical context remains as guardrails for thought and application.

While prayer is common for most Christians, it is easy to let it become rote and superficial. The ancient practice of *examen* can be reintroduced in order to grow in self-knowledge, honesty, non-judgmentalism, and the grace of God. Slowing down, as well as guiding large or small groups through the *examen* process, can reinvigorate spiritual transformation in people and congregations. *Examen* will likely lead to repentant confession and reconciliation with God and one another. Confession is a process similar to self-denial in which the disciple recognizes places which do not line up with what God says about them. Renouncing sinful beliefs, thoughts and actions, as well as seeking reconciliation, is akin to re-establishing one's identity *within* the Christ narrative. Fasting as a spiritual practice can enhance the practices of *examen* and confession. Church leaders can find multiple ways to engage individuals and the entire congregation in the process. Taken together, walking through the self-discovery and self-evaluation of *examen*, and then confessing whatever wrong is found and celebrating whatever good is present, engages the disciple with God and his people in honest and intimate relationships. By receiving and then living out God's love, forgiveness, and reconciliation within

the local congregation, individuals and the community re-anchor their identities into redemption's story and re-invigorate the desire to love others sacrificially which in turn deepens the development of personhood and community flourishing. In this way, giving grows the giver as well as the receiver and the community.

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